NATION

Haldwani violence claims 5 lives, 3 injured

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Banks lead recovery as Sensex & Nifty surge

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SPORTS

Iyer is unlikely to be picked for the last three Tests

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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

ساہ روزنامہ بنگلور

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X/PARVEEN KASWAN

City to get leopard task force with 100 trained men

BENGALURU, 9 FEB

Karnataka Forest Minister Eshwar Khandre has directed his department to create a dedicated Rapid Leopard Task Force (RLTF) for Bengaluru. At least 100 personnel will receive training at Bannerghatta National Park for safely capturing and rehabilitation of leopards. This decision comes after a leopard sighting near Bommanahalli's Kudlu Gate.

Khandre issued the order after receiving a notice over an elusive big cat that was wandering in a residential area was shot dead during its capture. The team was slammed for improper skills.

Wildlife conservationist Sanjay Gubbi and senior officers are currently training the personnel on proper rescuing of trapped animals, monitoring leopard movements, identifying footprints, setting up capture cages, and administering anaesthesia under veterinary supervision.

The training aims to equip personnel with the necessary skills to ensure the safety of both leopards and residents.

—Salar News

India has 97 cr voters now, up 6% from 2019: EC

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

The Election Commission on Friday said nearly 97 crore Indians will be eligible to vote in this year's Lok Sabha elections. It also said over two crore young electors in age group of 18 to 29 years have been added in the voters' list. There has been a six per cent increase in registered voters from 2019, when the last Lok Sabha polls were held.

The registered voters then were 91.20 crore. "The largest electorate in the world - 96.88 crore are registered to vote for the forthcoming General Elections in India," the EC said. The gender ratio has increased from 940 in 2023 to 948 in 2024, the poll panel said.

The Commission has put special emphasis on purity and health of the electoral roll along with disclosures and transparency in the revision of electoral rolls, an official pointed out.

Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar had explained at a press conference in Pune the various tasks involved in revision of electoral rolls.

—PTI

Section 144 near Vidhana Soudha from 12 to 23 Feb

BENGALURU, 9 FEB

Prohibitory orders under Section 144 of Criminal Procedure Code have been enforced in 2km area around Vidhana Soudha here from 12 to 23 February in view of Assembly session. Gathering of more than five people and any form of protests were prohibited in the area, according to orders issued by City Police Commissioner B Dayananda on Friday. Assembly session is scheduled from 12 to 23 February and the State budget will be presented on 16 February. During the Assembly session, political parties are likely to hold protest front of Vidhana Soudha to disrupt the session. Taking into account of the intelligence inputs, the prohibitory orders were imposed, the order said.

—Salar News

CM trains guns on Sitharaman over Upper Bhadra funds

He says State yet to get Rs 5K cr despite Union Budget allocation

CHITRADURGA, 9 FEB

Siddaramaiah and Nirmala Sitharaman ***PHOTO: X***

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah trained his guns on Nirmala Sitharaman for not releasing Rs 5,300 crore for the Upper Bhadra project announced in the Union budget and Rs 11,495 crore grants recommended by the 15th Finance Commission.

Days after staging a demonstration in New Delhi against the alleged apathetic attitude of the Centre in distributing funds to Karnataka, Siddaramaiah on Friday questioned Union Finance Minister Sitharaman's sense of responsibility towards Karnataka as a Rajya Sabha member from the State.

Speaking to reporters, he recalled that Sitharaman had said in last year's budget that Rs 5,300 crore would be given for the Upper Bhadra project by March 2024.

Pointing out that the State government has spent Rs 2,435 crore on the project this fiscal, he said that out of the total of Rs 8,000 crore funds pumped into the project so far, Karnataka's share is about Rs 6,000 crore.

The Upper Bhadra project is a major lift irrigation scheme under implementation in the central region of Karnataka. It envisages lifting up to 17.40 TMC of water in the first stage from the Tunga to the Bhadra river and lifting 29.90 TMC of water in the second stage from the Bhadra to a tunnel near Ajjampura in the Tungabhadra sub-basin of Krishna basin.

The total cost of the project is estimated at Rs 21,473.67 crore.

Asserting that the Centre's injustice should anger Kannadigas, he said Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar had met Union Water Resource Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat and insisted upon the release of funds, but to no avail.

Furthermore, Siddaramaiah said that the finance minister had rejected the 15th Finance Commission's recommendation on special grants.

"The 15th Finance Commission had recommended special grants; one was Rs 5,495 crore and another was 6,000 crore. Both put together was Rs 11,495 crore. But we did not get even a rupee of it. It was rejected by Sitharaman. Is it not an injustice?," he asked.

When he was asked whether the State was planning to approach Supreme Court, Siddaramaiah said he had not thought of it yet, but characterised what happened as injustice. "But it is true that injustice has happened because for each Rs 100 tax collected by us for the Centre, we get only Rs 12 to Rs 13 in return while Rs 87 or Rs 88 goes to Centre," Siddaramaiah explained.

He said when Prime Minister Narendra Modi was Gujarat chief minister, he had once said that the Centre should directly collect taxes from the people of the state instead of recovering the tax revenue from the state administration. "Now he (Modi) says that we are dividing India. What should we call him for his previous statement?," Siddaramaiah wondered aloud. He pointed out that when the BJP's Basavaraj Bommai was chief minister, his 2023-24 budget had reiterated that the state would get Rs 5,300 crore because Sitharaman had said so. Bommai had also said that the Upper Bhadra project would be declared a national project.

—PTI

>>>More on Page 3

CM asks contractors to file case over '40% commission'

Chitradugra, 9 Feb

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah asked Karnataka State Contractors' Association president D Kempanna to approach Justice Nagamohan Das Commission if he has documents to prove that corruption is prevailing in the state. Chief Minister who spearheaded the '40 per cent commission' campaign against the previous BJP government, said Kempanna can lodge a complaint against those demanding bribe. Kempanna on Thursday alleged that the practice of 40 per cent kickbacks on government contracts continues even under Congress regime as well. Accusing officials in state government of rampant corruption, he said, earlier (during previous BJP regime) public representatives were demanding bribes, now it's their turn. *—PTI*

AHEAD OF LS POLLS

2 former PMs, Swaminathan to get Bharat Ratna

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

PV Narasimha Rao ***PHOTO: IANS***

Former prime ministers PV Narasimha Rao, Chaudhary Charan Singh and Green Revolution pioneer Dr M S Swaminathan will be conferred with the Bharat Ratna, it was announced on Friday.

Rao is widely recognised for ushering in economic reforms in the 1990s while Singh is known as a champion of farmers' cause.

The announcement was made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, days after the Centre named former Bihar chief minister Karpoori Thakur, a champion of backward empowerment, and LK Advani, a founding BJP member credited with charting the course of its rise through the 1990s, for Bharat Ratna, the country's highest civilian honour.

At five, one more than the four announced in 1999, this is the maximum number of Bharat Ratnas announced for a year. With this, the number of recipients of the prestigious award, instituted in 1954, has risen to 53,

Rao, a Congress veteran, was prime minister from 1991 to 1996.

The honour for Swaminathan comes against the backdrop of protests by farmers in the NCR region and plans for similar stir in the coming days.

With national awards often conveying a message beyond the public contributions made by their recipients, the Modi government's pick of five of them--three of the four politicians in the list firmly belonging to the non-BJP sphere--for Bharat Ratna in an election year is no exception. Lok Sabha polls are expected to be held in April-May.

The honour for Singh comes at a time when the RLD, led by his grandson Jayant Chaudhary, is believed to be in talks with the BJP for an alliance for the Lok Sabha polls. Singh died in 1987.

Chaudhary, who is the Rashtriya Lok Dal(RLD) president, said the Centre won his heart with the announcement of Bharat Ratna to his grandfather. "Dil Jeet Liya," he posted on X.

—PTI

NAWAZ TO FORM UNITY GOVT AFTER IMRAN'S LEAD

ISLAMABAD/LAHORE, 9 FEB

Nawaz Sharif said his party respects the mandate of all parties, ***PHOTO: PTI***

Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif on Friday called for a unity government as the cash-strapped Pakistan appeared to be heading towards a hung parliament, with independent candidates backed by jailed ex-premier Imran Khan's party springing a surprise by winning 92 out of the 224 seats for which results were declared so far.

Addressing the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) supporters at the party's central secretariat in Lahore, 74-year-old Sharif said his party respects the mandate of all parties, including the independent candidates backed by Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party.

According to the latest Election Commission data, results of 224 constituencies out of 265 were declared. Independent candidates (mostly supported by PTI) bagged 92 seats while PML-N got 63 and PPP 50. Smaller parties secured 19 seats. Overall, 169 seats are needed to secure a simple majority out of its total 336 seats, which include the reserved slots for women and minorities. Votes are still being counted after Thursday's general election which was marred by allegations of rigging, sporadic violence and a countrywide mobile phone shutdown. Changing his stance of not forging any alliance with any party, Sharif on Friday said that there is a need for all the parties to sit together and form a government to pull Pakistan out of its difficulties.*—PTI*

>>>More on Page 6

Parl passes Bill to curb exam malpractices

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

The Bill was passed through a voice vote in Rajya Sabha on Friday ***PHOTO: PTI***

Parliament on Friday passed a landmark bill that aims to curb malpractices and irregularities in competitive examinations by including stringent punitive provisions.

Union Minister Jitendra Singh asserted that the Bill is meant to deter those who play with the future of the youth.

The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Bill, 2024, passed in Rajya Sabha, has provisions for a maximum jail term of 10 years and a fine up to Rs 1 crore.

The Bill was passed through a voice vote in Rajya Sabha on Friday, after amendments proposed by some opposition members were rejected. The bill was passed by Lok Sabha on 6 February.

The bill proposes a high-level national technical committee on public examinations that will make recommendations to make the computerised examination process more secure. The move comes against the backdrop of cancellation of a series of competitive tests such as the teacher recruitment exam in Rajasthan, Common Eligibility Test (CET) for Group-D posts in Haryana, recruitment exam for junior clerks in Gujarat and constable recruitment examination in Bihar following question paper leaks.

The committee shall look into developing protocols for insulating digital platforms, devising ways and means for developing foolproof IT security systems, ensuring electronic surveillance of examination centres and formulating national standards and services for both IT and physical infrastructure to be deployed for conduct of such examinations.

The objective of the bill is to bring in greater transparency, fairness and credibility to the public examination systems.

—PTI

PARL NOD TO OBC QUOTA IN LOCAL BODIES IN J&K

NEW DELHI 6 FEB

The Rajya Sabha on Friday passed three legislations relating to Jammu and Kashmir including the bill to provide reservation to Other Backward Classes in local bodies to bring consistency in the local bodies' laws of the Union territory with the provisions of the Constitution.

Rajya Sabha passed the Jammu and Kashmir Local Bodies Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024, Constitution (Jammu and Kashmir) Scheduled Castes Order (Amendment) Bill, 2024 and Constitution (Jammu and Kashmir) Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Bill, 2024. The three bills have been passed by Lok Sabha.

—PTI

ENVIRONMENTALISTS VS GOVT

Govt faces backlash over HC annex in Cubbon Park

MEGHANA PRASAD
BENGALURU, 9 FEB

Environmentalists are opposing the government's move, citing encroachment on the park ***PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD***

State government's proposal to construct a 10-storey annex for the high court inside Cubbon Park, Bengaluru's biggest green space, has sparked tensions between the government and environmentalists.

The Karnataka State Bar Council building next to the Press Club of Bangalore is to be demolished to make way for the construction of the new high-rise building. Earlier, the State Election Commission office stood in place of the Bar Council building.

Environmentalists have been strongly opposing the government's move, citing encroachment on the park, increased vehicular traffic, and a disregard for the 1975 Parks (Preservation) Act. The enactment required the State to preserve and maintain parks as horticultural gardens.

Rohita Balagopal, a soft skills trainer and an image consultant, told **Salar News**, "Heritage spots should not be targeted for this type of construction."

The government has been acting on the 2019 high court order permitting construction on the site of the old Election Commission Office without cutting trees.

Priya Chetty Rajagopal, the founder of Heritage Beku, told **Salar News,** "This is a shocking turn of events, as the previous plan of constructing a seven-storey building faced a huge backlash. This is a far bigger project than that, and this can affect the ecosystem of the park if it involves any cutting of trees. Even the security of the space is crucial because the minute there is a huge building on the premises, there are chances of an increase in human and vehicular traffic. This can lead to issues with parking as well. At no means can the construction take place without the permission of the Horticulture Department."

Heritage Beku is a group of citizens from all walks of life working towards protecting the history of Bengaluru. People like conservation experts, policy researchers, lawyers, environmental activists, corporate players, artists, journalists, and architects are part of this organization. In 2018, Heritage Beku evolved as a citizen initiative to maintain and preserve Bengaluru's fading heritage. Commenting on the proposal, Cynthia Stephen, a civic activist and policy researcher, said, "There are already two roads that run through the park connecting it to the main roads, and this construction might just add to the problem."

In October 2019, the government faced a strong backlash on the proposal to construct a seven-storey building, which was later shelved due to public opposition. According to sources, the petition against the project garnered 22,000 signatures from across the city. With Bengaluru facing a scarcity of green spaces, the potential loss of a portion of Cubbon Park has become a symbolic flashpoint for conservation efforts.

—Salar News

SC hears on deleting 'Secular' from Preamble

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

Supreme Court on Friday questioned whether the Preamble of Constitution could be amended while keeping the date of adoption, 26 November, 1949 intact.

A bench of Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta posed the question to former Rajya Sabha MP Subramanian Swamy and lawyer Vishnu Shankar Jain, who have sought deletion of the words "Socialist" and "Secular" from the Preamble of the Constitution. Jain said that the Preamble of Constitution of India comes with a specific date, therefore it cannot be amended without discussion. Swamy intervened and said that the 42nd Amendment Act was passed during the Emergency (1975-77).

The bench said that the matter required detailed discussion and posted the hearing on the two petitions to 29 April.

On 2 September, 2022, the top court had tagged Swamy's plea with other pending matter -- filed by one Balram Singh and others -- for hearing.

Both Swamy and Singh has sought deletion of words "Socialist" and "Secular" from the Preamble. The words 'Socialist' and 'Secular' were inserted in the Preamble of the Constitution under the 42nd Constitutional amendment moved by the Indira Gandhi government in 1976.

The amendment changed the description of India in the Preamble from a "sovereign, democratic republic" to a "sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic.

—PTI

Metro's Purple Line to be disrupted tomorrow

BENGALURU, 9 FEB

Metro services will be disrupted on Purple Line between MG Road and Indiranagar Metro stations from 7am to 9am on Sunday due to maintenance works by Bengaluru Metro Rail Corporation Limited (BMRCL). During this time, the trains will run between MG Road and Challaghatta and also between Indiranagar and Whitefield (Kadugodi). The metro services of the entire Purple Line will be restored by 9am. However, Green Line service will start as per the schedule at 7am from all the respective terminal stations. —*Salar News*

Cop suspended for harassing woman complainant

MANGALURU, 9 FEB

A head constable attached to Kavoor police station has been suspended for mentally harassing a woman who approached the station to lodge a complaint.

City police commissioner Anupam Agarwal issued the suspension order based on the woman's complaint that head constable, Santhosh, had threatened and sent abusive messages to her mobile phone. It is alleged that the policeman had secured the mobile number of the woman when she came to the station and later used to torture her by sending abusive messages. He also allegedly threatened her with life if she lodges a complaint against him. Unable to bear the torture, the woman had filed a complaint with City Police Commissioner.—*PTI*

SALAR NEWS

1 hurt, 1 dead in two separate elephant attacks

MADIKERI, 9 FEB

An elderly woman was severely injured in an elephant attack at Chinnenahalli village in Kushalanagar taluk in Kodagu district, raising concerns about the increase in human-wildlife conflicts in the region bordering forests. Venkatamma was taken to Mysuru Government Hospital after sustaining severe injuries. This wasn't her first brush with danger, having survived a similar attack previously. Venkatamma's father-in-law had met a fatal fate at the hands of an elephant three decades ago. The village has lost 20 lives due to attacks from wild animals in the past decade.

Despite the construction of a solar electric fence along the forest periphery, its effectiveness remains questionable, as elephants frequently breach the barriers, exploiting shallow ditches left unplumbed.

In another incident, a forest watcher engaged in tiger protection was killed in an elephant attack in Bandipur Tiger Reserve. According to officials, the elephant trampled special Tiger Protection Force watcher Raju to death at Moleyur on Thursday.

He had done commendable work during his association with Karnataka Forest Department helping catch many poachers, they added.—*Salar News*

Three child labourers rescued in Udupi

MANGALURU, 9 FEB

Officials of Labour department, children's protection unit, child helpline and police have rescued three child labourers who were employed at a jewellery shop in Udupi, on Friday. Officials visited the shop on Thursday after receiving complaints that children were working at the jewellery shop. The children were employed for gold polishing work, police said. They have been presently accommodated in the children's orphanage as per the orders of child welfare committee, they added. —*PTI*

Suburban Rail Project to be ready by Dec 2027

MoU signed between govt, KfW Development Bank of Germany

BENGALURU, 9 FEB

State Minister MB Patil on Friday said the Bengaluru Suburban Railway Project (BSRP) is expected to be completed by December 2027.

The Minister was speaking to reporters here at the signing of the MoU between State government and the KfW Development Bank of Germany for funding the BSRP project. The bank will lend Rs 4,561 crore at an annual interest rate of four per cent interest for 20 years.

N Manjula, Managing Director of K-RIDE (Rail Infrastructure Development Company-Karnataka),which is the nodal agency to complete the project, and Wolf Muth, Country Director, KFW Development Bank signed and exchanged the documents in the presence of Patil, who holds the infrastructure development portfolio.

This is the supplementary agreement between Germany's KfW Development Bank and K-RIDE followed by the primary agreement on 15 December, 2023 between the Department of Economic

Affairs of the Government of India and KfW for the disbursal of Rs 4,561 crore.

Minister for Large and Medium Industries and Infrastructure Development MB Patil during the Mou Signing at Vidhana Soudha in Bengaluru on Friday **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

According to him, the funding is for Corridor-1 from Bengaluru City Railway Station to Devanahalli and Corridor-3 from Kengeri to Whitefield.

"We have not yet started Corridor-1 and Corridor-3 for want of funds. Now that we have got funds we will take up the project," the minister explained.

Corridor-1 has been split into two parts. The first part from Yelahanka to Devanahalli will be finished by December 2026 while Bengaluru City to Yelahanka will be completed by December 2027.

- Rs 4,561 crore is to be lend at an annual interest rate of four per cent interest for 20 years which is for Corridor-1 from Bengaluru City Railway Station to Devanahalli and Corridor-3 from Kengeri to Whitefield

The Minister also underlined that the BSRP will not compete with the Metro Rail project but complement it. He also promised to resolve the land acquisition issue pertaining to the Corridor-1and Corridor-3.

The loan will also be utilised for the works of Corridor-4 (Heelalige to Rajanukunte) Station work, Depot-1 (Devanahalli), S&T Signal & Telecom), PSD Platform Screen Door), AFC (Automatic Fare Collection), Solar Panel and Security Equipment, MMI (Man Machine Interface).

Manjula said, "The project has been planned like the Metro. It has been designed to have a train-service every 90 seconds. The operational issues will be decided on the passenger footfall." The time limit of December 2027 is contradictory to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 40-month deadline to finish the Bengaluru Suburban Rail Project, which pegged the completion date as December 2025.

While laying the foundation stone of BSRP in Bengaluru in June 2022, the Prime Minister had said that "what had not happened in the past 40 years will be completed in the next 40 months". BSRP, sanctioned through the Ministry of Railways for a project cost of Rs 15,767 crore, aims to develop a suburban railway network of 148 km with 58 stations along four corridors. —*PTI/ANI*

SHOOT DK SURESH REMARK

Congress leaders and workers protest against BJP leader KS Eshwarappa for his alleged derogatory remarks against MP DK Suresh, in Bengaluru on Friday **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

CM to take legal action against Eshwarappa

BENGALURU, 9 FEB

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Friday said that legal action will be taken against the former minister KS Eshwarappa. The statement comes in response to Eshwarappa's controversial statement suggesting that Congress MP DK Suresh and MLA Vinay Kulkarni should be shot for allegedly supporting the idea of a separate nation for South India.

Speaking at Chitradurga Siddaramaiah said that kill, shoot and hit are the language of people trained under RSS. "Eshwarappa knows no other language than kill, hit and shoot. Is this how a political leader should talk?" asked Siddaramaiah.

About the recent protests of Congress in Delhi demanding a fair share of taxes, Siddaramaiah said, "When Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the chief minister of Gujarat, he opposed less tax distribution to Gujarat and demanded the then central government to give up tax collection from Gujarat but now however, he is criticising the State's protest.

We still have hope left from the Centre and is currently not considering to take matterers to the Supreme Court." he said.

On allegations of State contractor's association against government officials asking for commission, Siddaramaiah said that if the proper documents are provided in the background of the allegations, the government will conduct an investigation.

The ruling Congress government formed the Nagmohan Das Commission to investigate the 40 per cent commission charge that the previous government was charging from the contractors. —*Salar News*

CM orders crackdown against drug menace in City

BENGALURU, 9 FEB

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has issued a directive to the State Director General of Police (DGP) to take strict measures to tackle increasing drug menace in State especially near education institutions. Recently, MLC Dinesh Gooligowda raised concern over increased use of ganja and drugs among minors.MLA said there is the need to address the issue on behalf of affected children and their families. He proposed special squads at the district level to tackle drug trafficking, and a helpline to encourage public cooperation while ensuring confidentiality of informants' identities.Patrols within a 1km-radius of schools and colleges, were also recommended. —*Salar News*

Tensions flare during Sulibele's Namo Bharat event

CHIKKAMAGALURU, 9 FEB

Tension prevailed during Namo Bharat programme by Hindutva ideologue Chakravarthy Sulibele in Chikkamagaluru as Youth Congress workers protested at the venue.

As many as 17 Youth Congress workers staged a protest en route to the venue at Vijayapura, while another group resorted to a half-naked demonstration in the middle of the road. Meanwhile, a third faction positioned themselves behind the stage, brandishing a black flag bearing derogatory remarks against Sulibele.

Police intervened and quelled the confrontation, averting potential escalation.

Former MLA CT Ravi voiced his discontent against the waving of the flags. Police apprehended the three youths responsible for waiving the flag.

Sulibele dismissed the opposition as a routine affair. "This is nothing new to me. I have weathered the storm of criticism from Congressmen before, and their allegations only embolden our cause." —*Salar News*

- Former MLA CT Ravi voiced his discontent against the waving of the flags. Police apprehended the three youths responsible for waiving the flag

As many as 17 Youth Congress workers staged a protest en route to the venue at Vijayapura **PHOTO: SALAR**

Speaker UT Khader with Council Chairman Basavaraj Horatti, Revenue Minister Krishna Byregowda during training programme for media and MLAs in Bengaluru on Friday **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

'MLAs, scribes should support each other'

BENGALURU, 9 FEB

The media and legislators should have a cordial relationship as one cannot function without the other, said Speaker UT Khader. "Legislators mostly connect to the public through media and both should behave responsibly," Khader said at a training organised by State Assembly secretariat for legislators and journalists here on Friday.

Legislators should carry out proper homework before coming to attend the Assembly session, said Khader, who led the session. "They should have a knowledge of allocations and projects to their constituencies and the budget so that they can make informed decisions," Khader said.

The training, coming in view of the upcoming Assembly sessions and budget, witnessed low attendance from both sectors. State Council Speaker Basavaraja Horatti, Revenue Minister Krishna Byregowda, Muddebihal MLA Appaji CS Nadagouda, Kannada Prabha Editor-in-Chief Ravi Hegde and Karnataka Press Club President R Sridhar were also present. First-time MLAs, including Darshan Puttannaiah and Nayana Mottamma, took part in the orientation for legislators.

Hegde requested the speaker to hold such orientation programmes with the media once in six months. "Journalism syllabus in this era has no depth. Budget and Assembly coverage should be a part of the syllabus so that more people will be efficient in covering these events," he said.

Dinesh Amin Mattu, a senior journalist and former chief minister's media advisor, addressed the journalists on reporting Assembly sessions. —*Salar News*

Hanuman flag row: Mandya bandh evokes poor response

MANDYA, 9 FEB

The bandh called by pro-Hindu organisations against the removal of a Hanuman flag at Keragodu village of Mandya on Friday evoked poor response as vehicular traffic was normal and business establishments worked as usual in Mandya.

Hundreds of Hindu activists took out a bike rally from Karegodu village to Mandya town demanding the re-installation of the flag. They offered prayers at Anjaneya Temple near Mandya railway station and walked from there to Divisional Commissioner's office chanting Jai Shri Ram slogans. They also submitted a petition to the Governor through the Deputy Commissioner.

PHOTO: SALAR

Bajrang Dal leader Murali Krishna said: "We will make Mandya a factory of Hindutva; if you have the strength, let us stop it. We are not in favour of any caste or party, but we are in favour of Hindu society. When it comes to Hinduism and Dharma, we hoist the Hanuman flag in every nook and corner of the country."

Police provided tight security in the area, especially in the house of Mandya MLA Ravikumar Gowda (Ganiga). —*Salar News*

2 JD(S) MLAs to join party soon: Congress leader

KOLAR, 9 FEB

Kolar Congress MLA Kothur G Manjunath claimed that two JD(S) legislators will join Congress soon. The JD(S) MLAs are GK Venkatashiva Reddy of Srinivasapura and Samruddhi Manjunath of Mulbagal.However, Reddy denied this, and said he is happy with JD(S). Manjunath, along with Congress MLC ML Anil Kumar, claimed that the proposal to induct the twi JD(S) MLAs has been discussed with the top Congress leadership. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Deputy Chief Minister and KPCC President DK Shivakumar have agreed to induct them. Manjunath said the two JD(S) leaders joining Congress before the election will strengthen the party in the district. —*Salar News*

Ex-Minister Narayana Gowda may join Cong

MANDYA, 9 FEB

Speculation is rife about former minister KC Narayana Gowda's potential switch to Congress. Agriculture and District In-charge Minister N Cheluvarayaswamy hinted that a decision regarding Gowda's political allegiance would materialise within 10 days. "We haven't made any commitments. Individuals have transitioned to Congress from various political affiliations in Mandya. Gowda's departure from BJP, citing dissatisfaction with JD(S) signals a potential convergence towards Congress," he said. About the protest in Delhi, the minister said despite repeated entreaties, State's pleas for financial assistance have gone unanswered, prompting the protests. "We demanded Rs 15,000 crore from the Centre. We aren't demanding a specific amount; any assistance would suffice."

Narayana Gowda **PHOTO: SALAR**

Cheluvarayaswamy minced no words in his rebuke of BJP's inaction. "If BJP MPs have any shred of integrity, they would refrain from contesting elections until our grievances are addressed. Nirmala Sitharaman, the Rajya Sabha member from our State, ought to have been more proactive. With the exception of DK Suresh, not a single MP has shown solidarity with our cause," he said. —*Salar News*

Mins bat for green hydrogen development plan

BENGALURU, 9 FEB

State Energy Minister KJ George chaired a meeting along with Large and Medium Industries Minister M B Patil on Friday to chalk out a policy to promote Green Hydrogen in the state.

Green Hydrogen is hydrogen produced by the electrolysis of water, using renewable electricity.

The key objectives of this initiative would be to facilitate the development of green hydrogen production capacity of at least 0.5 million tonnes per annum, catering to the domestic and export markets.

According to an official statement, the objectives are to attract investments that qualify under the strategic interventions for Strategic Interventions for Green Hydrogen Transition under National Green Hydrogen Mission; to foster demand for Green Hydrogen and its derivatives among industry and mobility sectors through fiscal incentives; and to enable employment generation through skilling programmes, initiatives, as well as to enable strategic tie-ups with industry and other stakeholders. —*PTI*

- Green Hydrogen is hydrogen produced by the electrolysis of water, using renewable electricity.

Centre gives nod to wellness centre in M'luru

MANGALURU, 9 FEB

Union government has given in-principle approval for the establishment of a Central Government Health Scheme (CGHS) Wellness Centre in Mangaluru, on Friday. This will fulfil a long-standing demand of retired central government employees. Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya informed Dakshina Kannada MP Nalin Kumar Kateel in a letter on 5 February that CGHS wellness centres will be established in 20 cities across India, including Mangaluru.

With over 5,500 central government employees currently serving in Dakshina Kannada and neighbouring districts, in addition to 29,000 retired employees, the establishment of this health centre will provide convenient access to medical treatment in accordance with the rules of their central government employment. —*PTI*

BILLS PASSED SANS DISCUSSION

Citizen groups call out govt for 'attacking democracy'

BENGALURU, 9 FEB

A group of 22 organisations and 20 individuals in a chargesheet titled 'We the People of India vs Government of India' called out the government for the systemic attack on parliamentary democracy. It was released in an online press conference on Friday.

"Parliamentary democracy has been attacked consistently for the past ten years in many ways in which democracy has been decimated and called for an action to all Indian citizens to hold our MPs and the ruling government to account," said the release.

It also alleges that the Centre government passed parliamentary Bills without providing an opportunity for the MPs and people to analyse and scrutinise the Bills.

The charge sheet also states: "Between 2016 and 2023, on average, 79 per cent of the Budget has been passed without discussion. As per the conventional process, Lok Sabha discusses budgets of some Ministries in detail and votes on them separately. Lesser number of sittings, shorter budget sessions, poorly planned agenda of a government leads to less and less proportion of the Budget being discussed in detail and more and more of it being passed without discussion."

PHOTO: PTI

The organisations including All India Lawyers Association for Justice(AILAJ), All India People's Science Network, and Association for Protection of Civil Rights (APCR), Bahutva Karnataka stated that in 2015, 2020, 2021 and 2023 the government has deleted questions raised by opposition MPs and in December 2023 alone, 250+ questions raised by Opposition MPs were deleted. —*Salar News*

Land for jobs case: Court grants bail to Rabri, daughters

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

A Delhi court on Friday granted interim bail to former Bihar chief minister Rabri Devi and daughters MisaBharti and HemaYadav till February 28 in the Railways land-for-job case.Special Judge Vishal Gogne granted relief to the three after the ED claimed that it needed time to file arguments on their regular bail application.The accused appeared before the court in pursuance to the summons issued by the court in the case after taking cognisance of the charge sheet filed by the ED. During the proceedings, the court asked the ED why it needed the accused's custody when it had not arrested them during its investigation.—*PTI*

AP CM meets Modi, seeks special category status

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy met Prime Minister NarendraModi and sought special category status for the state, on Friday. Reddy, who swept 2019 state polls riding on the issue of special category status, has held several meetings with prime minister and Union Home Minister Amit Shah over the issue in the past. With Congress gaining ground in Andhra Pradesh and Telugu Desam Party (TDP) likely to tie up with BJP, Reddy has rushed to the national capital to make a last-ditch effort.The special category status is one of the provisions of Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, which led to the formation of Telangana in June 2014.—*PTI*

BJP walks out from Bengal Assembly over land rights

KOLKATA, 9 FEB

BJP legislators staged a walkout from West Bengal Assembly over their demand for a discussion on land rights for tea garden workers in the state, on Friday. Speaker Biman Banerjee did not allow an adjournment motion brought by BJP MLAs on the issue during Zero Hour but gave a go-ahead to a legislator to read out the text of the motion in the House. After BJP member read out the text, claiming that tea garden workers in northern West Bengal were not being given land rights by state government, saffron party MLAs stood up holding placards and raised slogans demanding a discussion on the issue.Women members from the treasury bench also rose from their seats and raised counter-slogans against opposition.—*PTI*

Dil Jeet Liya: Jayant on Bharat Ratna to Charan Singh

LUCKNOW, 9 FEB

RashtriyaLok Dal president JayantChaudhary said, Centre won his heart with the announcement of Bharat Ratna to former Prime Minister ChaudharyCharan Singh. "DilJeetLiya," he posted on X.JayantChaudhary is the grandson of Charan Singh, a famed farmers' champion.The matter also came up in Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly, where Samajwadi Party president AkhileshYadav, Speaker SatishMahana, and Parliamentary Affairs minister Suresh Khanna hailed the decision and lauded the farmers' leader. Former prime ministers PV NarasimhaRao and ChaudharyCharan Singh, as well as agriculture scientist MS Swaminathan will be honoured with Bharat Ratna, Prime Minister NarendraModi announced on Friday. Charan Singh served as fifth prime minister of India between July and August in 1979.He also served as chief minister of UP on two occasions -- from 3 April, 1967 to 25 February, 1968 and from 18 February, 1970 to 1 October, 1970.—*PTI*

UPA put family first, left India in dire straits in 2014, says FM

Finance Minister claims Narendra Modi govt put 'nation first'

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

Nirmala Sitharaman said in Parliament that India is now on the way to become the third largest global economy *PHOTO: PTI*

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Friday lambasted the previous Congress-led UPA government for its mismanagement of the economy saying the party put "family first" and left the country in "dire straits" in 2014, but it is now lecturing the Modi government on handling the economy.

Initiating the debate on the 'White Paper on Indian economy and its impact on the lives of people of India' in the LokSabha, Sitharaman said the Modi government put "nation-first", and took the economy from 'fragile five' to 'top five'.

India is now on the way to become the third largest global economy, she said.

Amid constant bickering by the Congress, Sitharaman said the White Paper is for record of posterity and the youth should know what efforts Prime Minister NarendraModi has put in to restore India's past glory.

"Ten years of one government with some crisis and 10 years of a different government with a different crisis. The comparison shown in this 'White Paper' clearly says how if the government handles it with true sincerity, transparency and putting the nation first, the results are there for everybody to see," Sitharaman said.

The minister, in a spirited speech that was interrupted by the opposition members, said the Covid crisis was much "deadlier" than the global financial crisis of 2008, but the Modi government handled it with sincerity, transparency and dedication providing free vaccines to people.

Referring to the coal scam during UPA, she cited the CAG report to say that it resulted in a huge loss of Rs 1.86 lakh crore to the country and the Supreme Court had to cancel licences of 214 coal blocks.

The coal scam resulted in job losses, created coal shortage and power outages, she said, adding that investments too suffered.

On the other hand, the Modi government conducted coal auctions in a transparent manner and now coal production has increased to 900 MT from 567MT in 2014.

"You turned coal into ashes, but the Modi government through its policies turned coal into diamonds," she said, adding that the Congress is now shredding "crocodile tears" even though coal bearing states had suffered revenue losses as a result of the scam during their time.

—*PTI*

Will open as many schools as no. of summonses sent: Kejri

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

Arvind Kejriwal *PHOTO: PTI*

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Friday said providing quality education is his government's goal and asserted that he will open as many schools in the city as the number of summonses sent to him by probe agencies.

After laying the foundation stone of a government school building in MayurVihar Phase III, Kejriwal alleged that the BJP-led Centre has unleashed all its probe agencies against him as though he was the "biggest terrorist" of the country.

The AamAadmi Party (AAP) leader has been asked to appear before a city court on February 17 in connection with a complaint case filed by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) against him. Kejriwal has skipped five summonses issued against him by the federal agency for questioning in a money-laundering case linked to the alleged excise policy scam.

The chief minister asserted that providing quality education to all children will eradicate poverty within a generation and said his government is opening schools after schools in Delhi to achieve that goal.

The condition of the government schools in the national capital and education was hopeless earlier and the children of poor people had no future, he claimed.

"We have opened so many magnificent schools since the AAP government was formed in Delhi. Several new schools have been inaugurated recently, including in Burari, Rohini and Palam, in which 1.5 lakh children will get education," he said. —*PTI*

Mirwaiz under house arrest: Management of Jama Masjid

SRINAGAR, 9 FEB

The management body of Srinagar's historic Jama Masjid claimed that authorities have placed Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, chief priest of Kashmir, under house arrest, on Friday. Mirwaz was to give a special sermon today on the occasion of Shab-e-Mehraj at Jama Masjid, as had been announced," AnjumamAuqafJama Masjid said. A large number of people were expected at mosque for Mirwaiz's sermon, adding the authorities stationed police vehicles outside the main gate of Farooq's residence at Nigeen."Anjuman strongly denounces repeated house arrest of Mirwaiz especially on Friday, disabling him from visiting Jama Masjid to deliver Friday sermon and participate in the mandatory Friday prayers," management body said.There was no immediate reaction from the authorities to the claim.Mirwaiz was released from house arrest in September last year after remaining confined to his home for more than four years.

—PTI

Some trying to turn India from secular to religious: Kerala CM

KASARAGOD, 9 FEB

Kerala CM highlighted that as the state has moved forward It has witnessed a rise in unscientific practices *PHOTO: PTI*

- Chief Minister also highlighted that as the state moves forward progressively and scientifically, it was also witnessing a rise in unscientific practices and thoughts in the society

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said that certain people were trying to turn country from a secular nation into a religious one by giving priority to "concocted stories" instead of intellectual thought, on Friday.

Vijayan said there was, therefore, a need to move forward cautiously and vigilantly.

Chief Minister also highlighted that as the state moves forward progressively and scientifically, it was also witnessing a rise in unscientific practices and thoughts in the society.

"Even in these modern times, we saw heinous acts like human sacrifice take place in the state. Superstitious thoughts are also on the rise. We need to look at these issues seriously and defend against them.

To do that, we need to create scientific awareness in society and the Kerala Science Congress is one such solution," Vijayan added during the inauguration of 36th Kerala Science Congress (KSC).

This year's theme of KSC was 'Transforming Kerala's Economy through One Health Approach'.

One Health policy was important as human health is intertwined with that of the environment and wildlife.

Around 70 per cent of the diseases affecting humans originate from animals and this assumes significance in view of the population density of Kerala and the huge forest land in the state.

Kerala has set a shining example in the country in sustainable development as well as education, health and various other areas.

Kerala has also set aside Rs 3,500 crore in its budget for Research and Development. —*PTI*

Will stop illegal poppy cultivation: N Biren Singh

IMPHAL, 9 FEB

PHOTO: PIXABAY

- Manipur shares 398 km of international border with Myanmar, of which 10 km has already been fenced

Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh asserted that efforts are underway to eradicate illegal poppy cultivation in northeastern state.

"Satellite mapping is being carried out and surveys are being conducted through unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to pinpoint locations of poppy plantations," he said.

Singh also thanked Prime Minister NarendraModi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah for the Centre's decision to erect fencing along the India-Myanmar border and suspend Free Movement Regime (FMR).

Manipur shares 398 km of international border with Myanmar, of which 10 km has already been fenced.

While Imphal Valley-based Meiteis have welcomed Centre's decision to fence the entire 1,643-km-long India-Myanmar border and suspend FMR, hills-based tribal Kukis and Nagas have opposed the move, stating it would sever ethnic ties with kin on the other side of the border.Chief Minister also thanked Union Finance Minister NirmalaSitharaman for the decision to form a High Powered Committee for consideration of "challenges coming out of fast population growth and demographic changes".

Kuki refugees started settling down in the jungles in Imphal Valley, raising fears of a demographic change in the region. The unrest began when rumours started circulating that the refugee settlements had been declared as villages.

Shah's remarks had sparked protests by Kuki bodies that demanded clarification of the statement.

—*PTI*

SENA LEADER'S KILLING

Killer held grudge, used bodyguard's pistol to murder

MUMBAI, 9 FEB

Mauris Noronha *PHOTO:PTI*

A bodyguard of Mauris Noronha, who killed Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Abhishek Ghosalkar has been detained by the Mumbai Crime Branch on Friday.

The pistol used by Noronha belongs to his bodyguard, Amarendra Mishra. The weapon was made at an ordnance factory and its licence is in Mishra's name.

Police have recorded the statements of Noronha's family members, including his wife, and learnt that he nursed a grudge against Ghosalkar.

Noronha, was earlier arrested in a rape case and spent nearly five months behind bars.

After coming out of jail, Noronha would frequently say that he wouldn't "spare" Ghosalkar.

Noronha, first decided to win Ghosalkar's trust by offering an olive branch to him. He began putting up Ghoslkar's banners in his area.

Around 7.30pm on Thursday, Ghosalkar was in his office at IC Colony, which is less than 100 metres from Noronha's set-up on the ground floor of 'PrabhuUdyogBhavan' building, when got a call from Noronha.

Noronha asked him to come over to his office on the other side of the road, saying they would distribute sarees to women there. Noronha's office has banners with messages like "Corona Yoddha' and 'Vote for Maurisbhai'.

Noronha then suggested to Ghosalkar that they do a Facebook Live to announce their decision to bury the hatchet and work for the people.

During the FB Live, Noronha pumped bullets into Ghosalkar from his bodyguard's pistol. He then rushed to the mezzanine floor of his office and shot himself in the head.

Sena seeks dismissal of Shindegovt over law & order situation in M'rashtra

Shiv Sena (UBT) demanded the dismissal of the EknathShinde government in Maharashtra on Friday.

His demand was over law and order situation after a leader of the opposition party was shot dead and another politician was injured in a gun attack inside a police station.

Raut also targeted Deputy Chief Minister DevendraFadnavis, who holds the home portfolio, and demanded his resignation over the law and order situation.

"This (twin attacks) reflects failure of (state) Home Minister (Fadnavis). Prime Minister NarendraModi and (Union Home minister) Amit Shah are responsible for imposing this government on us," RajyaSabha member remarked.

He claimed crime rate has gone up ever since EknathShinde-led government assumed office in June 2022.

Shiv Sena (UBT) leader and former corporator-AbhishekGhosalkar was shot dead during a 'Facebook Live' session by a 'social activist' in the northern suburb of Borivali (West) on Thursday evening. The assailant, Mauris Noronha, killed himself moments later.

Last week, a BJP MLA was caught on camera firing at a Shiv Sena leader inside a police station in Ulhasnagar in adjoining Thane district and leaving him critically injured over a dispute.

"We have a list of police personnel posted in Thane and Mumbai. They all are members of the Shinde Sena. They will be dealt with after 2024 (state assembly) polls," Shiv Sena (UBT) leader warned. —*PTI*

GHOSALKAR'S MURDER DUE TO GANG WAR: UDAY SAMANT

THANE, 9 FEB

Maharashtra Industries Minister UdaySamant condemned the shocking murder of Shiv Sena (UBT) leader AbhishekGhosalkar on Friday. He attributed it to the ongoing "gang war" within Uddhav Thackeray-led party.Ghosalkar was shot dead on Thursday evening during a 'Facebook Live' by a local 'social activist', who also ended his own life.A viral video of the incident, which took place at assailant Mauris Noronha's office in IC Colony in northern suburb of Borivali (West), showed ex-corporatorGhosalkar being shot in abdomen and shoulder.Samant said nobody should lose their life in this manner, even if they are one's political rivals. He urged for collaborative efforts to maintain peace and security in the state.He claimed that there was a deeper connection between Noronha and top Sena (UBT) leaders. Samant countered Sena (UBT) leader Sanjay Raut's claim that Noronha had met Maharashtra Chief Minister EknathShinde a few days ago, calling it a mischief.Referring to the conversation between Ghosalkar and Noronha, Samant said, "When two leaders of (Sena) UBT are discussing their plans, how does Shiv Sena come into the picture?"He also called for a thorough investigation into the circumstances leading up to the murder.

—*PTI*

IN WEST BENGAL

Protest over arrest of absconding TMC leader turns violent

BARASAT, 9 FEB

A poultry farm in Zeliakhali belonging to Hazra was also set ablaze *PHOTO: PTI*

- People agitated in Sandeshkhali in North 24 Parganas district on Friday, demanding the arrest of absconding TMC leader Sheikh

People agitated in Sandeshkhali in North 24 Parganas district on Friday, demanding the arrest of absconding TMC leader Sheikh Shajahan and his aides.

With sticks and brooms in their hands, locals took out processions in different areas of Sandeshkhali as protests intensified on the second day.In the afternoon, Shajahan's aide ShiboprasadHazra's house was vandalised and some furniture was torched, police said.

A poultry farm in Zeliakhali belonging to Hazra was also set ablaze, they said.

Superintendent of Police HossainMehediRahaman said forces were sent to the area and working to tackle the situation.

He said a complaint was lodged by the villagers against Shajahan and his aides on Thursday, and it was being looked into.

Addressing a press conference, Additional Director-General (Law and Order) Manoj Verma urged people not to take the law into their own hands.

"Investigation is underway into all complaints that have been lodged and action will be taken. At the same time, if someone takes up the law into their hands, the law will take its own course. The situation is at present under control," he said.

Meanwhile, the locals began a sit-in outside the Sandeshkhali police station, stating that it would continue till Shajahan and his aides were arrested.

Shajahan went missing last month after a team of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) that went to raid his house in the alleged ration scam was attacked by a mob.

Locals alleged that Shajahan and his "gang" captured swathes of land by force, besides torturing people during their "reign".

Meanwhile, Shajahan's supporters also took to the streets, and police said they were trying to prevent a clash.

The TMC claimed that the BJP and CPI (M) were inciting the people to foment unrest in the area.

"There could have been discontentment against one or two TMC leaders in the area. The conspirators took advantage of that to foment trouble. It is an isolated incident, and people's grievances will be addressed," TMC spokesperson KunalGhosh said.

BJP said the incident was an outcome of pent-up rage among the people.

CPI(M) leader Tanmoy Bhattacharya said the "illegal occupation" of hundreds of acres of land and police inaction led to the public outburst. —*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Mumbai bound flight returns due to 'foul smell'

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

A Mumbai-bound IndiGo aircraft returned to the national capital on Friday morning, with the airline saying the plane came back as a precaution due to a "momentary foul smell".The flight 6E 449 returned to the Indira Gandhi International Airport (IGIA) sometime after take-off. In a statement, IndiGo said there was a "momentary foul smell" and the pilot following standard operating procedures landed back in Delhi as a precaution. Specific details could not be immediately ascertained."An alternate aircraft was arranged for the passengers. We deeply regret the inconvenience caused to all the passengers," the airline said.*—PTI*

3 suffer burns at Magh Mela in Prayagraj

PRAYAGRAJ, 9 FEB

Three people sustained burn injuries when a fire erupted in the camp of Kinnar Akhara, Magh Mela area, on Friday.The wounded were given first-aid at Ganga Hospital located in Mela area and were admitte to Swaroop Rani Nehru Hospital, said Mela officer Dayanand Prasad. According to Prasad, the blaze was completely controlled in about an hour by fire department personnel. However, a lot of goods got damaged in the incident. Radhika Tiwari of Kinnar Akhara said bedding, clothes etc. were burned. *—PTI*

Mahadev betting app case: Cop dismissed

DURG, 9 FEB

A constable of Chhattisgarh police, has been dismissed from service, in connection with Mahadev Betting app case, on Friday. He was earlier suspended after his arrest in connection with the multi-crore betting app fraud case. As per an order issued by Durg Superintendent of Police Jitendra Shukla, Constable Bhim Singh Yadav of Supela police station was dismissed amid a money laundering probe by Enforcement Directorate (ED) concerning the app. Yadav and a cash courier, Asim Das, were arrested by federal agency on 3 November, 2023, just before the first phase of Assembly polls in Chhattisgarh.ED had earlier said that alleged illegal funds generated by the betting app were used to pay bribes to politicians and bureaucrats in State. *—PTI*

Man rapes daughter's friend, arrested

JAIPUR, 9 FEB

Police arrested a 54-year-old man in Odisha's Jajpur district for allegedly raping his daughter's friend and uploading her obscene photos after she refused to have physical relationship with him, a police officer said on Friday.According to the complaint filed by the 23-year-old woman at Panikoili police station, the accused happens to be the father of her friend. However, she did not reveal it to her friend or anybody else as he apologised for the incident. The victim said he raped her again when she was in her relative's house in Cuttack a couple of months back. He also filmed the act on his mobile phone and threatened to make photos of their intimate moments viral if she did not continue the physical relationship. The woman then filed a complaint after learning from her friends about her obscene photos posted on social media aid inspector in-charge. *—PTI*

Haldwani violence claims 5 lives, 3 injured

Violence broke out after a madrasa was demolished

HALDWANI, 9 FEB

In Uttarakhand, five people were killed and three critically injured when violence broke out over demolition of an illegally-built madrasa and a place for offering namaz inside its premises in this Uttarakhand town where a curfew has been imposed and shoot-at-sight orders have been issued, officials said on Friday.

Nainital District Magistrate (DM) Vandana Singh and Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Prahlad Meena, who held a joint press conference here, confirmed the two deaths in the violence that erupted on Thursday.

Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami held a high-level meeting at his official residence in Dehradun on Friday and instructed Additional Director General of Police (ADG), Law and Order, AP Anshuman, to camp in Haldwani to ensure peace and law and order in the town's Banbhoolpura area.

Taking strong note of the attack on police personnel and administrative officials and an attempt to spread unrest in the area during the removal of illegal construction, the chief minister ordered strict action against unruly elements.

He asked the senior officials attending the meeting to maintain constant coordination with the Nainital DM.

The SSP said police had to use force in self-defence when an irate mob of unruly elements attacked the Banbhoolpura police station and police personnel.The two casualties were due to gunshot injuries, he said.Four people have been arrested for allegedly being involved in the attack on the police station and police personnel and three FIRs registered, the SSP said."The riot on Thursday was totally unprovoked and a handiwork of unruly elements who were not trying to protect the structures being demolished but were targeting the authorities, the state machinery, law and order," the DM said.Police dispersed the stone-pelting and petrol bomb-hurling mob without using excess force until the police station was attacked, she said. *—PTI*

An injured police personnel after violence broke out in Haldwani on Thursday *PHOTO: ANI*

HALDWANI VIOLENCE IS A CONSPIRACY: BJP

NEW DELHI, 11FEB

BJP MPs on Friday said the violence in Uttarakhand's Haldwani appeared to be a "conspiracy" strict action must be taken against the guilty, with Rajya Sabha MP Harnath Yadav demanding a "shoot at sight" order against rioters.

Asked about the Thursday violence, Yadav, a Rajya Sabha MP from Uttar Pradesh, said, "The incident in Haldwani is a conspiracy. Bombs, country pistols, and other weapons were used, and government officials and police were attacked. There should be an order to shoot rioters at sight... There is no need to be lenient with them."He said the Uttarakhand government should "search every house," and take action against the perpetrators. Rajya Sabha MP Brij Lal termed the razing of the madrasa a just move.*—PTI*

DAYS AFTER SURRENDER

Bilkis Bano case convict out on five-day parole

DAHOD, 9 FEB

Days after convicts in the Bilkis Bano case surrendered before jail authorities on Supreme Court orders, one of them has been given a five-day parole by the Gujarat High Court due to the death of his father-in-law, a police official said on Friday.

Convict Pradip Modhiya, a resident of Dahod district, has been released from Godhra district jail on parole.

The Supreme Court had last month quashed the remission of sentence of all 11 convicts in the 2002 post-Godhra riot case of gangrape of Gujarat woman Bilkis Bano and murder of her seven relatives.

"The Gujarat High Court has given a five-day parole to one convict Pradip Modhiya due to the death of his father-in-law. This is between the court and jail as they are in judicial custody," Deputy Superintendent of Police of Dahod district Visakha Jain said.

"He does not have to report to the police," she said.

Sources in Godhra district jail, where the convicts are lodged, said they have released Modhiya on parole on the High Court orders.

Judge MR Mengdey allowed a five-day parole for Modhiya instead of one month sought by him in his application filed before the HC citing the death of his father-in-law.

In August 2022, the 11 convicts, serving a life sentence, were granted premature release from jail after the Gujarat government accepted their remission applications in accordance with its 1992 policy, citing their 'good conduct' during imprisonment. The convicts hail from Singvad and Randhikpur villages under Singvad taluka of Dahod district neighbouring Panchmahal district, where Godhra is located.

The top court had on January 8 annulled the remission the Gujarat government had granted to the convicts while slamming the state for being "complicit" with an accused and abusing its discretion.

The SC then ordered the convicts, who were released from Godhra district jail on Independence Day in 2022 after being in prison for 14 years, to go back to jail within two weeks. They surrendered before Godhra jail authorities on 21 January.

Quashing the remission order, the Supreme Court had ruled that the Gujarat government lacked jurisdiction to grant premature release to the convicts as the trial in the 2002 case had been held in Maharashtra. *—PTI*

SC had last month quashed the remission of sentence of all 11 convicts in the gangrape of Bilkis Bano *PHOTO: PTI*

Counsel victims' mates: SC on UP slapping case

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

The Supreme Court slammed the Uttar Pradesh government on Friday for not counselling students who were allegedly instructed by their school teacher to slap a Muslim boy for not doing his homework.

Observing that there has been a complete breach of its directions by the Uttar Pradesh government, a bench of Justices Abhay S Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan directed the state to counsel the children who witnessed the incident and file a compliance affidavit in two weeks.

"We have perused the latest TISS report, which calls for the counselling of all the students who had taken part in the corporal punishment as participants and witnesses. Nothing has been done by the state, it is too late in the day now.

"We direct the state to immediately implement the directions, especially for the witness children. Compliance affidavit to be filed in two weeks," the bench said while posting the matter for hearing on 1 March.

Additional Advocate General of Uttar Pradesh Garima Prashad said two organisations have volunteered for counselling the students and sought time to file a more detailed affidavit.

The court had earlier castigated the state government for not complying with its order to depute an agency for counselling the Muslim boy and his classmates who were allegedly instructed by their school teacher to slap him for not doing his homework. *—PTI*

APEX COURT ASKS

If judges can go to judicial academy why not lawyers: SC

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

If judges can go to the National Judicial Academy for training, why not lawyers, the Supreme Court said on Friday while asserting that all advocates should undergo compulsory training and they should not be allowed to practise unless they have a certificate from a recognised law university.

The remark was made by a bench of Justices Bela M Trivedi and Pankaj Mithal while hearing the bail plea of Souvik Bhattacharya, son of Trinamool Congress (TMC) MLA Manik Bhattacharya, arrested in connection with the West Bengal teachers' recruitment "scam".

Appearing in the court on behalf of Bhattacharya, senior advocate Sidharth Luthra submitted that a bail application was filed by one of the lawyers in the trial court despite the absence of a summoning order."Why don't you have a law academy for lawyers? We have for judges. No action is being taken against erring lawyers by the Bar Council. They should be educated properly. Do something. There must be compulsory training for every lawyer, including the senior advocates.

The top court directed Additional Solicitor General SV Raju, appearing in the matter on behalf of the Enforcement Directorate (ED), to verify if there was any summoning order passed by the court and posted the matter for hearing after a week. *—PTI*

The top court directed Additional Solicitor General SV Raju appearing in the matter on behalf of ED *PHOTO: PTI*

MGNREGA funds case: SC judge recuses himself

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

Supreme Court judge Justice PS Narasimha recused himself from hearing a plea for allocation of funds for MGNREGA, on Friday. It was filed by a political party seeking a direction to Centre to ensure that states have adequate funds to implement the rural employment guarantee scheme, MGNREGA.

Swaraj Abhiyan, in its fresh plea, submitted that there is currently a grave crisis being faced by crores of workers under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA) in country, with their pending wages piling up along with negative balances in most of the states.

As of 26 November, 2021, state governments are facing a shortage of Rs 9,682 crore and 100 per cent of the allocated funds for the year have been exhausted before the conclusion of the year. This is despite this excuse of shortage of funds being a gross violation of the law, it said and referred to the apex court judgement on MGNREGA wage payments.The plea said directions to Centre be issued to put in place a mechanism to ensure that states have adequate funds to implement the programme for a subsequent month.It also sought issuance of direction to Centre and states to comply with the instruction of 31 May, 2013 issued by Ministry of Rural Development. *—PTI*

Ker 1st in India to get genomics-based test

T'PURAM, 9 FEB

A pioneer in genomics-based diagnostics solutions from IIT Bombay and a private super speciality hospital in Kerala have joined hands to introduce the world's first on-site genomics test for infectious disease diagnostics in the city, the two entities said in a joint statement.

IIT-Bombay-based Haystack Analytics and NIMS Medicity at Neyyattinkara here are collaborating to introduce 'infexnTM' -- the genomics test for diagnosing infectious diseases, the statement issued on Thursday said.

This partnership represents a significant breakthrough in the field of medicine aimed at detecting infectious diseases in Kerala, it said.

The 'infexnTM' is a state-of-the-art targeted next generation sequencing test designed to detect any bacterial and/or fungal infection along with detection of relevant antimicrobial resistance genes, within 24 hours, it said.

The test is a kit-cum-software solution and can be performed within a hospital."Made in India, Made for the World, infexnTM is a go-to-test for infection detection. The 'infexn' report can be life-saving for patients with suspected infection."More importantly, it can empower the healthcare ecosystem with advanced definitive diagnostics to achieve tailored antibiotic usage," the statement said. *—PTI*

A genomics-based diagnostics solutions from IIT Bombay joined hands with a private hospital in Kerala *PHOTO: PIXABAY*

Man gets 10 yrs sentence over links with ISIS

KOCHI, 9 FEB

A special NIA court here on Friday sentenced a Palakkad native to ten years of rigorous imprisonment under the stringent Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act for being a member of terror outfit ISIS and providing support to its activities.

NIA Special court judge Mini S Das sentenced the accused Riyas Aboobacker and also imposed a fine of Rs 1.25 lakh on him, court sources said.

The court had on 7 February, convicted Aboobacker under Sections 38 (membership of a terrorist organisation) and 39 (support given to a terrorist organisation) of the UAPA and section 120B (criminal conspiracy) of the IPC.

According to the NIA, Aboobacker was in direct contact with members of ISIS and shared their ideology.The agency had also claimed that he had organised conspiracy meetings at Kochi where he decided to carry out suicide attacks for furthering the terror outfit's activities in India. *—PTI*

COVID-19 GOT MUTATED 223 TIMES, SAYS MANDAVIYA

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

The Covid-19 virus got mutated 223 times in the world and its harmful effects have come done substantially over time, Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya said in Lok Sabha on Friday.

"Covid sub-variants are not that deadly.Health is such an issue where all stake holders and countries should come together and work. We have seen positive results during the pandemic when worked together," said Mandaviya. *—PTI*

Kota teen builds AI robot for farmers

KOTA, 9 FEB

A teenager in Rajasthan's Kota has built an all-purpose robot to help farmers assess soil and crop health, their water needs, and detect pests.

Aryan Singh, 17, built the AgRobot at his school's Atal Tinkering Lab, a central government initiative to help school children hone their building skills.

The son of a farmer, Aryan spent four years building the robot which won him Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar under science and technology category from President Droupadi Murmu in New Delhi on 22 January 2024"I belong to a farming family, grew up watching my grandparents and parents working in the field. While studying in class 10, I conceived the idea of developing a multi-task device and later developed a prototype that can reduce farmers' labour in the field," Aryan told.He has received over 15 national and international awards and appreciation for his innovation. AgRobot will be able to perform multiple tasks like cutting, irrigation, loading, soil-tracking etc. The robot is also equipped with soil moisture sensors that help farmers assess the soil health and look for any pests in them.The robot is fully run on solar energy with the help of a piezoelectric panel installed in it that uses pressure to produce electricity.Though building the prototype cost him Rs 50,000, "it will cost less when manufactured in large numbers," he said. *—PTI*

EXPERTS' TAKE

'Hope govt action on cervical cancer helps'

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

Cervical cancer is at the centre stage of public health concern with the government's push for vaccinations in the Union interim budget, a move that is a potential game changer for the disease that kills more than 77,000 women in India each year.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman last week said in her speech that the government will encourage vaccination against the human papillomavirus (HPV), which leads to cervical cancer, among girls aged nine to 14.

A day later, model-actor Poonam Pandey grabbed social media attention - and some headlines -- with claims she had died of the disease. It was a hoax, a stunt purportedly attributed to raising awareness about cervical cancer.

The fake claim raised some buzz about cervical cancer. But it is the government's proactive stance to promote vaccinations that will raise awareness, foster early immunisation practices and marks a significant step towards preventing unnecessary fatalities, said scientists.

Vaccinations for cervical cancer, the second most frequent cancer among women in India after breast cancer, have not picked up pace because of the costs involved - approximately Rs 4,000 per jab and two to three doses.

"Another concern has been that infections due to certain strains may not be covered by the vaccine. Screening would still be essential," Dr Gayatri Gogoi, associate professor of pathology and cancer researcher at Assam Medical College, Dibrugarh, told PTI.

"The vaccines to prevent cervical cancer are likely to become cheaper if the government includes HPV vaccine in the country's immunisation programme," added Dr Shuchin Bajaj, founder and director of the Ujala Cygnus Group of Hospitals.

An estimated 1,23,907 (over 1.2 lakh) women are diagnosed with cervical cancer in India every year and 77,348 of them die from the disease, according to WHO's HPV Information Centre.

India bears a significant portion of the global cervical cancer burden, contributing to over 6 lakh new cases reported worldwide in 2020.Though there is no clarity yet on whether cervical cancer vaccinations will be part of the national immunisation programme or if prices will fall, public health experts said it could well be a turning point.

Dr Atul Mohan Kochhar, CEO of the National Accreditation Board for Hospitals & Healthcare Providers (NABH), agreed with Bajaj, saying the step will encourage vaccination for young girls for prevention of cervical cancer. *—PTI*

India contributes to over 6 lakh new cases reported worldwide in 2020 *PHOTO: PTI*

MARCH AHEAD

Farmers' tractors are parked on the outskirts of Rome to protest the impact of EU climate policies on their livelihood. Mirroring protests across Europe, farmers in Italy want measures to combat production cost hikes
PHOTO: PTI

Is Israeli PM Netanyahu's political future uncertain?

Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has rejected a ceasefire plan put forward by Hamas, calling the terms "delusional". Claiming that an Israeli victory in Gaza is "within reach", Netanyahu has vowed to fight on until Hamas is completely destroyed.

But the US, which is involved in negotiation efforts along with Qatar and Egypt, has said that there could still be a path to a deal.

Hamas's plan came as a counter offer to a proposal put forward a week ago by Israel, the US, Qatar and Egypt. That framework reportedly involved a six-week truce during which Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners would be exchanged. In response, Hamas proposed a sweeping three-stage plan aimed at ending the war completely.

Under the terms of the plan, phase one would see a pause in fighting to allow for the release of Palestinian women and children from Israeli jails. They would be exchanged for Israeli women and males under 19 being held in Gaza, as well as the elderly and the sick. At the same time, Israeli forces would withdraw from Gaza's built-up areas as the reconstruction of hospitals and refugee camps begins.

During the second phase, Israeli forces would leave Gaza completely as the remaining Israeli hostages are exchanged for Palestinian prisoners. In phase three, Israel and Hamas would exchange bodies and remains. Throughout the process, the pause in fighting would allow for essential aid supplies to be delivered to Gaza.

Hamas' plan also envisages ongoing negotiations to end the war completely, with a view to these concluding by the end of phase three.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, long a highly divisive figure in Israel and abroad, has seen his approval ratings plummet in Israel since the Hamas attacks of 7 October
PHOTO: PTI

> A poll last month found that only 15 per cent of Israelis think he should keep his job after the war ends. Such figures suggest an alternative reason why he may be keen to continue the war for as long as possible

Netanyahu's calculations

Both the content of the Hamas proposal and Netanyahu's rejection of it are revealing about the current political state of play for both parties. Netanyahu, long a highly divisive figure in Israel and abroad, has seen his approval ratings plummet in Israel since the Hamas attacks of 7 October in which 1,200 Israelis were killed and around 240 taken hostage.

A poll last month found that only 15 per cent of Israelis think he should keep his job after the war ends. Such figures suggest an alternative reason why he may be keen to continue the war for as long as possible.

Netanyahu and his government have also been under increasing pressure from the hostages' families, who recently stormed a meeting of the Knesset to demand more action to release their loved ones. On 6 February, five Israeli women who were released from Gaza during the November ceasefire called on Netanyahu to do whatever is necessary to secure the release of the remaining 136.

Similarly, Sharone Lifshitz, whose 85-year-old mother, Yocheved, was freed during the November ceasefire and whose 83-year-old father, Oded, is still being held, has criticised Netanyahu's rejection of the ceasefire proposal. In a press conference in the UK, Sharone Lifschitz said: "We need that deal to happen now … I don't think Israel has another option."

Yet Netanyahu is also facing pressure from hardliners within his own government. In particular, far-right national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, has been threatening to dissolve the coalition if Netanyahu makes any concessions to Hamas.

While Ben Gvir is not part of the Israeli war cabinet – formed as an emergency response to the 7 October attacks – Netanyahu will be conscious of his potential to collapse the government.

Hamas' aims

As for Hamas, there are reports of a deepening rift between the Gaza cadre, led by 7 October mastermind Yahya Sinwar, and the exiled leadership in Doha, headed up by political bureau chair Ismail Haniyeh.

Sinwar, who has become increasingly powerful in Gaza in recent years, is said to back a temporary immediate truce while Haniyeh is pushing for a full ceasefire with major Israeli concessions.All the while, the war in Gaza continues. With United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reporting a toll of more than 26,000 Palestinians killed, more than 65,000 injured, and 1.7 million displaced, the UN is now warning that famine is inevitable in the Strip.

As negotiations continue to go back and forth, time is running out for the most vulnerable.

Courtesy, The Conversation

SALAR ساڵار

How AI chatbots are aiding cyber criminals

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools aimed at the general public, such as ChatGPT, Bard, CoPilot and Dall-E have incredible potential to be used for good.

The benefits range from an enhanced ability by doctors to diagnose disease, to expanding access to professional and academic expertise. But those with criminal intentions could also exploit and subvert these technologies, posing a threat to ordinary citizens.

Criminals are even creating their own AI chatbots, to support hacking and scams.

AI's potential for wide-ranging risks and threats is underlined by the publication of the UK government's Generative AI Framework and the National Cyber Security Centre's guidance on the potential impacts of AI on online threats.

There are an increasing variety of ways that generative AI systems like ChatGPT and Dall-E can be used by criminals. Because of ChatGPT's ability to create tailored content based on a few simple prompts, one potential way it could be exploited by criminals is in crafting convincing scams and phishing messages.

A scammer could, for instance, put some basic information -- your name, gender and job title -- into a large language model (LLM), the technology behind AI chatbots like ChatGPT, and use it to craft a phishing message tailored just for you. This has been reported to be possible, even though mechanisms have been implemented to prevent it.

LLMs also make it feasible to conduct large-scale phishing scams, targeting thousands of people in their own native language.

It's not conjecture either. Analysis of underground hacking communities has uncovered a variety of instances of criminals using ChatGPT, including for fraud and creating software to steal information. In another case, it was used to create ransomware.

Malicious chatbots

Entire malicious variants of large language models are also emerging. WormGPT and FraudGPT are two such examples that can create malware, find security vulnerabilities in systems, advise on ways to scam people, support hacking and compromise people's electronic devices.

Love-GPT is one of the newer variants and is used in romance scams. It has been used to create fake dating profiles capable of chatting to unsuspecting victims on Tinder, Bumble, and other apps.

As a result of these threats, Europol has issued a press release about criminals' use of LLMs. The US CISA security agency has also warned about generative AI's potential effect on the upcoming US presidential elections.

Privacy and trust are always at risk as we use ChatGPT, CoPilot and other platforms. As more people look to take advantage of AI tools, there is a high likelihood that personal and confidential corporate information will be shared.

This is a risk because LLMs usually use any data input as part of their future training dataset, and second, if they are compromised, they may share that confidential data with others.

Leaky ship

Research has already demonstrated the feasibility of ChatGPT leaking a user's conversations and exposing the data used to train the model behind it – sometimes, with simple techniques.

In a surprisingly effective attack, researchers were able to use the prompt, "Repeat the word 'poem' forever" to cause ChatGPT to inadvertently expose large amounts of training data, some of which was sensitive. These vulnerabilities place person's privacy or a business's most-prized data at risk.

More widely, this could contribute to a lack of trust in AI. Various companies, including Apple, Amazon and JP Morgan Chase, have already banned the use of ChatGPT as a precautionary measure.

ChatGPT and similar LLMs represent the latest advancements in AI and are freely available for anyone to use. It's important that its users are aware of the risks and how they can use these technologies safely at home or at work.

Here are some tips for staying safe.

Be more cautious with messages, videos, pictures and phone calls that appear to be legitimate as these may be generated by AI tools. Check with a second or known source to be sure.

Avoid sharing sensitive or private information with ChatGPT and LLMs more generally.

Also, remember that AI tools are not perfect and may provide inaccurate responses. Keep this in mind particularly when considering their use in medical diagnoses, work and other areas of life.

You should also check with your employer before using AI technologies in your job. There may be specific rules around their use, or they may not be allowed at all.

As technology advances apace, we can at least use some sensible precautions to protect against the threats we know about and those yet to come.

Courtesy, The Conversation

Criminals are even creating their own AI chatbots, to support hacking and scams
PHOTO: PIXABAY

LETTERS Write to us at salar@salar.news

Demolished Mehrauli mosque leaves orphans homeless

Critics allege that the planned demolitions unfairly focus on Muslim cultural and historical heritage ***PHOTO: MUZAMMIL SULEMAN /BBC***

The 12-year-old loved looking at the grass, leaves and trees around the mosque where he lived and studied in India's capital Delhi. He moved here two years ago from a neighbouring state after his parents suddenly died.In a new city, looking at the familiar colour made Fawad feel safe. But now, he says it makes him cry.

On 30 January, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) - a federally-run urban planning organisation - bulldozed the mosque, alleging illegal encroachment. Along with it, the madrassa - where Fawad and 25 other students, mostly orphans, lived - and an adjacent graveyard and a shrine of a Sufi saint (Islamic mystic) located inside the mosque complex were also razed.

Nestled in Sanjay Van, a sprawling 784-acre forest in Mehrauli, one of Delhi's seven medieval cities, the area is teeming with ruins and monuments that narrate the city's rich past.

In a statement, the DDA said the mosque was an "illegal structure" which was demolished "without any hindrance and disturbance".But the mosque's imam Zakir Hussain and their advocate Shams Khwaja deny this, saying the property belonged to the Delhi Waqf Board, which is responsible for the maintenance of Islamic properties in the city.

Hussain claims that authorities did not give them written notice before demolishing the structures. He also alleges that copies of the Quran were damaged, children were not allowed to save their belongings and that property records which proved that the mosque wasn't illegal were taken away from them."They left us out in the cold with nothing but prayers," Hussain says.The DDA has denied all the allegations, saying that the land on which the mosque stood was its property.

"The matter is also being heard by the Delhi High Court, which on Thursday observed there are "enough structures" in Delhi and that should not come in the way of restoring the city's forests. Outraged preservationists and historians have called this a "mindless" destruction of collective heritage that strikes at the very soul of the city.

Critics have questioned the logic behind labelling centuries-old structures - older than the forests and habitats around them - illegal. They also allege that the planned demolitions unfairly focus on Muslim cultural and historical heritage. Among the 20 religious structures slated for removal in Sanjay Van according to the DDA, 16 are Muslim shrines ("mazaars") and four are temples.

"Clearly a pattern is emerging and it sets alarming precedent for a country that treats all religions equally," Hashmi says.

But Tiwari said that a "perfectly legal" move was unnecessarily being given religious overtones. He added that the DDA frequently acted against encroachments on government land, including by temples, and that it had demolished five temples in a different neighbourhood on the same day as the mosque.

"We are just doing our job," he said.

Those affected say the mosque's demolition was unannounced and chaotic. guarding the site.

Muzammil Salmani, who taught English and Hindi at the madrassa, says his uncle was buried in the graveyard next to the mosque. After the demolition, all they found were some broken pieces of his grave's epitaph.

"People don't understand - this was not just an old mosque, graveyard or madrassa. It was a shelter," he says.

Not much is known about the mosque's history - some say it was built by a 13th Century princess, Razia Sultana, considered the first female Muslim leader of the Indian subcontinent. Others say it could be even older. Hashmi says the use of grey stone in the structure indicates it could have been built during the Sultanate period about 600-700 years ago.

For the people of Mehrauli, the mosque was also a social lifeline, a sanctuary and an escape, says Usama, who uses only one name.

"Even though it was inside the jungle, the place was an important community centre which brought all kinds of people together. For them, its value was practical and not just historical," he says.

DDA authorities maintain the structure was razed because it was illegally constructed on precious forest land.

Sanjay Van, one of the city's last green havens, earned protected forest status in the 1990s amid rising urbanisation concerns. Lately, the DDA has initiated multiple anti-encroachment efforts in the area.

But historians point out that the mosque existed much before the forest got protected status and therefore couldn't be considered an encroachment.

In 2023, the DDA in its own submissions before the high court had said it would not demolish mosques, graves, and other legitimate properties owned by the Delhi Waqf Board in Mehrauli as they fell within the board's purview, and carried religious significance.

Last week, the DDA said the mosque's demolition was "approved" by a religious committee formed to look into such cases. Mosque authorities have challenged this in court, alleging that authorities overrode a 2022 court ruling that ordered DDA to identify land owned by the Waqf and demarcate it before undertaking any demolitions in the area.

—BBC News

PHOTO: AP

Swiss cops kill axe wielding hostage taker on train

ESSERT-SOUS-CHAMPVERT, 9 FEB

Swiss police say a 32-year-old Iranian asylum-seeker was killed by police after he used an axe and a knife to seize more than a dozen hostages for several hours on a train in western Switzerland. No passengers were injured. The man took the hostages on Thursday and police, alerted by passengers, sealed off the area while the train was stopped in the town of Essert-sous-Champvert, police in the French-speaking Vaud region said Friday. The man, speaking Farsi and English, demanded that the train engineer join the 15 hostages. Nearly four hours after the incident began, police stormed the train after trying to negotiate with the man through an interpreter. More than 60 police were involved. "The hostages were all freed safe and sound," a police statement said.
—AP

Oscars announce new award for best casting from 2026

LOS ANGELES, 9 FEB

A new Oscar for best casting will be introduced from 2026, Academy Awards organisers have announced. It will be the first new competitive category at the ceremony since best animated feature was added in 2002. Casting directors have campaigned in recent years to be recognised in the way other film crafts like sound, costume and hair and make-up are. In a statement, Academy bosses said casting directors "play an essential role in filmmaking". Academy CEO Bill Kramer and president Janet Yang continued: "As the Academy evolves, we are proud to add casting to the disciplines that we recognise and celebrate. "We congratulate our casting directors branch members on this exciting milestone and for their commitment and diligence throughout this process."
—BBC News

Volcanic eruption in Iceland subsides, more may follow

LONDON, 9 FEB

A volcanic eruption in southwestern Iceland appears to have subsided, though scientists are warning that the area may experience further eruptions in the coming months. Iceland's Meteorological Office said late Thursday that the eruption had decreased significantly.
The eruption began at about 6 am local time on Thursday in the area northeast of Mount S lingarfell, the Met Office said. It prompted the evacuation of the popular Blue Lagoon thermal spa and cut off heat and hot water to several communities on the Reykjanes Peninsula in southwestern corner of the island. Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir said authorities hope to restore hot water to the area by midday on Friday.*—PTI*

Ruffalo honoured with a star on Walk of Fame

LOS ANGELES, 9 FEB

Ace actor Mark Ruffalo has become the latest celebrity to receive his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in a ceremony on Thursday. The 'Poor Things' actor appeared at the special occasion with his wife Sunrise Coigney and two of their three kids -- Bella, 18, and Keen, 22. Odette, 16, People reported. In his acceptance speech, Mark expressed his gratitude to his family. Mark's close friend and actor Jennifer Garner was also present at the ceremony. She gave a huge shout out to Mark. Mark is the 2,772nd person to receive a star on the famed street. He also received a tribute from director David Fincher, who he worked with in the 2007 crime drama Zodiac.
—ANI

PTI-backed independent candidates lead in Pak polls

The results are delayed; violence and rigging mar general elections

ISLAMABAD, 9 FEB

Jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's party-backed independent candidates were leading on Friday in Pakistan's election results that started trickling in following unusual delays, leading to allegations of vote rigging.

Votes are still being counted in Pakistan after Thursday's general election which was marred by allegations of rigging, sporadic violence and a countrywide mobile phone shutdown.

There were dozens of parties in the fray but the main contest was among Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), whose candidates are running as independents, former three-time premier Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and Bilawal Zardari Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP).

People read morning newspaper reporting the early results of elections at a stall in Peshawar, Pakistan, Friday *PHOTO: AP*

To form a government, a party must win 133 seats out of 265 in the National Assembly. Election to one seat was postponed after the death of a candidate.

Overall, 169 seats are needed to secure a simple majority out of its total 336 seats, which include the reserved slots for women and minorities. Pakistan's authorities were earlier moving at a snail's pace to announce the election results that in a surprising development showed disqualified ex-prime minister Khan's PTI supported independent candidates leading the show.

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) started updating results at a faster pace after facing a barrage of criticism by the parties, especially the PTI which accused that its mandate was being stolen.

Khan, 71, a cricketer-turned-politician and the founding chairman of the PTI, is behind bars and barred from contesting.

PTI candidates are running as independents after they were not allowed to use the party symbol - a cricket bat.

The ECP data shows that results of 122 constituencies have been declared, which include 49 independents (mostly supported by PTI), PML-N 39, PPP 30 and other seats going to smaller parties.

The big names who won included PML-N top leaders, including former premier Sharif who won by a big margin by getting 171,024 votes against PTI-backed independent Dr Yasmin Rashid who polled 115,043.

His younger brother and former premier Shehbaz Sharif also won, in addition to his son Hamza Shehbaz and Sharif's daughter Maryam Nawaz. All four family members scored victories from Lahore, their home and party's stronghold.

PTI leader Gohar Ali Khan won NA-10 in the Buner area of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa with 110,023 votes, according to the ECP. He defeated Awami National Party candidate Abdul Rauf who came second with 30,302 votes. PTI's former speaker National Assembly Asad Qaisar also won. PPP leaders Asif Ali Zardari and his son party chief Bilawal were leading in their constituencies. *—PTI*

2.3M REFUGEES IN RAFAH

Israel bombs crowded Rafah amid US warning

Airstrikes overnight and into Friday hit two residential buildings in Rafah, killing eight Palestinians *PHOTO: PTI*

RAFAH, 9 FEB

Israel bombed targets in overcrowded Rafah on Friday. This was hours after Biden administration officials warned Israel against expanding its Gaza ground offensive to the southern city where more than half of the territory's 2.3 million people have sought refuge.

Airstrikes overnight and into Friday hit two residential buildings in Rafah, killing eight Palestinians, and a third strike targeted a kindergarten-turned-shelter for the displaced in central Gaza, killing at least four people, according to hospital officials and AP journalists who saw bodies arriving at hospitals.

Some of the wounded children were treated while lying on the floor.

Israel's stated intentions to expand its ground offensive to Rafah also prompted an unusual public backlash in Washington.

The comments signalled intensifying US friction with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who pushed a message of "total victory" in the war this week.

With the war now in its fifth month, Israeli ground forces are still focusing on the city of Khan Younis, just north of Rafah, but Netanyahu has repeatedly said Rafah will be next, creating panic among hundreds of thousands of displaced people. Netanyahu's words have also alarmed Egypt which has said that any ground operation in the Rafah area or mass displacement across the border would undermine its 40-year-old peace treaty with Israel. The mostly sealed Gaza-Egypt border is also the main entry point for humanitarian aid. More than half of Gaza's population has fled to Rafah, heeding Israeli evacuation orders ahead of the military's continuously expanding ground offensive. *—PTI*

N Korea says will destroy South if provoked

SEOUL, 9 FEB

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un restated he has no desire for diplomacy with South Korea. The North would annihilate its rival if provoked, state media said Friday, in the latest of his belligerent statements that are raising tensions in the region.

During a visit to North Korea's Defence Ministry on Thursday, Kim said his recent moves to cut ties with South Korea allow his military to take on a more aggressive posture "by securing lawfulness to strike and destroy (the South) whenever triggered." Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have increased in recent months, with Kim elevating his weapons demonstrations and threats and the United States, South Korea and Japan strengthening their combined military exercises in response.

While most South Korean officials and experts have downplayed the possibility that Kim has real intent to engage in a war, concerns about a direct military provocation have grown as the North may try to ramp up pressure in an election year in South Korea and the United States.

The North's official Korean Central News Agency reported Kim said he took the initiative to "shake off the unrealistic pretense of dialogue and cooperation with the (South) Korean puppets who sought the collapse of our republic."

The agency said Kim on his visit to the ministry was accompanied by his daughter, thought to be named Kim Ju Ae, who some experts believe is being groomed as a future leader. *—AP*

Trump wins Nevada's Republican caucuses

LAS VEGAS, 9 FEB

Donald Trump *PHOTO: AP*

Former President Donald Trump won Nevada's Republican presidential caucuses Thursday after he was the only major candidate to compete.

Former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley skipped the caucuses, which are the only contest in Nevada that counts toward the GOP nomination. Haley cited what she considered an unfair process favouring Trump and instead ran in Nevada's symbolic state-run presidential primary on Tuesday, when she finished behind the "none of these candidates" option.

Trump's win in Nevada gives him all 26 of the state's delegates. He needs to accrue 1,215 delegates to formally clinch the party's nomination and could reach that number in March.

Though Trump has been the front-runner, Nevada's caucuses were seen as especially skewed in his favour due to the intense grassroots support caucuses require candidates to harness around a state in order to win. Nevada's state party last year barred candidates from running both in the primary and caucuses and also restricted the role of super PACs like the groups that were key to Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' campaign before he dropped out.

Trump has long been immensely popular among Nevada Republicans, but he had other perceived advantages among the party's key figures. *—PTI*

Biden's memory 'hazy' and 'poor': Report

WASHINGTON, 9 FEB

Joe Biden *PHOTO: AP*

US President Joe Biden made a serious gaffe when he called Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as "the president of Mexico" during a press conference in the White House, The Hill reported.

He made the remarks during a press conference after a Special Counsel report said that Biden was a "well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory."

Biden was found in the report by Justice Department Special Counsel Robert Hur to have "wilfully retained and disclosed classified materials" related to military and foreign policy in Afghanistan after serving as vice-president until 2017.

The report references showcased apparent lapses in memory from the US President. One reporter asked Biden, "How bad is your memory and can you continue as president?" In response, the US President said, "My memory is so bad I let you speak."

Another reporter asked Biden if he believed his memory had worsened. Biden responded, "My memory is fine. Take a look at what I've done since I became president. None of you thought could I pass any of the things I got passed. How did that happen? I guess I just forgot what was going on," as reported by CNN. *—ANI*

HOPE FOR WSJ SCRIBE

Putin calls on US to negotiate on Ukraine, hints prisoner swap

MOSCOW, 9 FEB

Russian President Vladimir Putin used an interview with former Fox News host Tucker Carlson to urge Washington to recognise Moscow's interests and persuade Ukraine to sit down for talks.

Putin also said that Russia stands ready to negotiate a potential prisoner exchange that would free Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, who was detained last March on espionage charges he denies, and hinted that Moscow wants the release of its agent imprisoned in Germany.

Most of the interview, released Thursday, focused on Ukraine, where the war is nearing the two-year mark. Putin repeated his claim that his invasion of Ukraine, which Kyiv and its allies described as an unprovoked act of aggression, was necessary to protect Russian speakers in Ukraine and prevent the country from posing a threat to Russia by joining NATO.

Putin pointed at Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's refusal to conduct talks with the Kremlin. He argued that it's up to Washington to stop supplying Ukraine with weapons and convince Kyiv, which he called a US "satellite," to sit down for negotiations.

Putin warned that the West will never succeed in inflicting a "strategic defeat" on Russia in Ukraine and rejected allegations that Russia was harbouring plans to attack Poland or other NATO countries.

It was Putin's first interview with a Western media figure since his full-scale invasion of Ukraine two years ago.

White House national security spokesman John Kirby tried to minimize the impact of Carlson's interview ahead of its release: "Remember, you're listening to Putin. And you shouldn't take at face value anything he has to say."

Putin has heavily limited his contact with international media since he launched the war in Ukraine in February 2022. Russian authorities have cracked down on independent media, forcing some Russian outlets to close, blocking others and ordering a number of foreign reporters to leave the country. Two journalists working for U.S. news organizations - The Wall Street Journal's Gershkovich and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Alsu Kurmasheva - are in jail. Asked by Carlson whether Russia would release Gershkovich, Putin said Moscow is open to talks but repeated that the reporter was charged with espionage, an accusation Gershkovich has denied. *—AP*

Vladimir Putin speaks during an interview with former Fox News host Tucker Carlson at the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia *PHOTO: AP*

- Putin pointed at Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's refusal to conduct talks with the Kremlin. He argued that it's up to Washington to stop supplying Ukraine with weapons and convince Kyiv, which he called a US "satellite," to sit down for negotiations

ZELENSKYY APPOINTS NEW MILITARY CHIEF

KYIV, 9 FEB

The man Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy named on Thursday to lead the country's military has played a key role in some of Ukraine's biggest victories in its war with Russia, including overseeing the successful defence of the capital in the early days of the invasion.

Colonel Gen Oleksandr Syrski, who had been commander of Ukraine's ground forces, takes over the head job at a challenging time. With the war poised to enter its third year, morale is low, the military is facing shortages of ammunition and personnel, and Kyiv is struggling to maintain support from the West.

The choice of Syrski as chief commander is hardly a surprise, as few in the Ukrainian military have the experience and know-how to be able to fill the shoes of his popular predecessor, Gen Valerii Zaluzhnyi. Syrski's battlefield successes have earned him the backing of his soldiers, who have been locked in grinding battles for two years.

Syrski, 58, is credited with organising the defence of Kyiv in February 2022. *—AP*

N Korea admits Russian tourists, first since 2020

SEOUL, 9 FEB

A group of Russian tourists headed to North Korea from Vladivostok airport in Russia's Far East on Friday, likely the first foreign travellers from any country to enter the isolated state since the pandemic.

The tour underscores deepening cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang, following a meeting last September between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin at a cosmodrome in Russia's Far East.

Many Russians now struggle to travel to Europe and the United States because of sanctions applied to Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. In October, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said he would recommend North Korea as a vacation destination.

South Korea's government said it has no record of North Korean state media reporting on tourists entering the country since the pandemic.

The tour group will visit the capital Pyongyang and will then go skiing, Inna Mukhina, the general director of the Vostok Intur agency, which is running the tour, told The Associated Press. Vladivostok airport's online timetable shows an Air Koryo plane took off for Pyongyang at 1.39 pm local time Friday.

The expanding ties between North Korea and Russia come as they are eached locked in separate confrontations with the United States and its allies North Korea over its advancing nuclear program, and Russia over its protracted war with Ukraine. *—AP*

Russians now struggle to travel to Europe and the US *PHOTO: AP*

PROVOKING ISLAMIST BACKLASH

Malaysia top court invalidates Sharia state laws

GANDHINAGAR, 6 FEB

Malaysia's top court Friday struck down over a dozen Shariah-based state laws, saying they encroached on federal authority, a decision denounced by Islamists who fear it could undermine religious courts across the country.

In an 8-1 ruling, the nine-member Federal Court panel invalidated 16 laws made by the Opposition-run Kelantan state government, which imposed punishments for offenses from sodomy, sexual harassment, incest, and cross dressing to giving false evidence.

The court said that the state could not make Islamic laws on those topics because they are covered by Malaysian federal law.

Malaysia has a dual-track legal system, with Shariah covering personal and family matters for Muslims, alongside civil laws. Ethnic Malays — all of whom are considered Muslim in Malaysian law — make up two-thirds of Malaysia's 33 million people, with large Chinese and Indian minorities.

In an 8-1 ruling, the nine-member Federal Court panel invalidated 16 laws made by Kelantan state government *PHOTO: AP*

Shariah is Islamic law, based on the Quran and a set of scriptures known as the hadith.

The court challenge was filed in 2020 by two Muslim women from Kelantan, a rural northeastern state whose population is 97% Muslim. Kelantan has been governed by the conservative Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, or PAS, since 1990.

Hundreds of PAS supporters gathered outside the court Friday calling for the protection of Sharia laws.

Takiyuddin Hassan told reporters outside the court building after the ruling. "When Shariah laws in one locality become invalid, this means that Shariah laws in other states may now face the same risk."

The PAS is a member of the opposition bloc and the single biggest party in Parliament, as well as governing four of Malaysia's 13 states. The party favours tough Islamic legal norms, once seeking to implement a criminal code known as hudud that includes penalties such as amputations for theft and stoning to death for adultery. This was blocked by the federal government.

The issue could be a challenge for Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who is struggling to win Malay support after taking office following 2022 general election.

Mohamad Na'im Mokhtar, the minister in charge of religious affairs, promised that the court ruling won't affect the position of Shariah courts.

He urged Muslims to stay calm and said the government will study the the ruling. He said in a statement that ongoing efforts to empower Shariah courts will continue.

Anwar has also disputed PAS's assertion that the case was an attack on Shariah laws. He has said the the root issue was about state jurisdiction and that the matter shouldn't be politicised. *—AP*

Rupee falls 7 paise to close at 83.03 against US dollar

MUMBAI, 9 FEB

The rupee depreciated by 7 paise to 83.03 (provisional) against the US dollar on Friday, tracking a strong American currency and elevated crude oil prices in the international market.Forex traders said the Indian rupee depreciated as foreign fund outflows weighed on the rupee. However, positive domestic markets cushioned the downside.At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 82.96 and finally settled at 83.03 (provisional) against the dollar, down by 7 paise from its previous close.On Thursday, the rupee settled on a flat note at 82.96 against the US dollar, after the Reserve Bank decided to keep the key policy rate unchanged for the sixth time in a row to maintain a tight vigil on inflation."We expect the rupee to trade with a slight negative bias on underlying strength in the US dollar and concerns over rising crude oil prices amid escalating geopolitical tensions in the Middle East," said Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst, Sharekhan by BNP Paribas.—*PTI*

Gold remains flat; silver jumps ₹400

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

Gold prices remained flat at Rs 63,300 per 10 grams in the national capital on Friday, according to HDFC Securities.However, silver prices jumped Rs 400 to Rs 75,000 per kilogram, while it had closed at Rs 74,600 per kg in the previous close."Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading flat at Rs 63,300 per 10 grams," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said.In the overseas markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,031 per ounce, up USD 2 from the previous close. Also, silver was trading up at USD 22.60 per ounce."The prospect of near-term rate cuts appeared to diminish from the US Federal Reserve's agenda, contributing to the subdued market sentiment.—*PTI*

In Q3, MRF sees Rs 509.71 cr consolidated PAT

CHENNAI, 9 FEB

Chennai-headquartered tyre major MRF Ltd has posted a consolidated profit after tax for the October-December 2023 quarter at Rs 509.71 crore, the company said on Friday.The company had recorded a consolidated profit after tax at Rs 174.83 crore, during the corresponding period of last year. For the nine-month period this fiscal, the consolidated profit surged to Rs 1,685.12 crore as compared to Rs 428.29 crore recorded a year ago.The consolidated total income during the quarter under review went up to Rs 6,240.08 crore, from Rs 5,715.91 crore registered in the same period of last financial year, MRF Ltd said in a BSE filing.For the nine month period ending December 31, 2023 the consolidated total income stood at Rs 19,042.88 crore, as against Rs 17,349.66 crore registered last fiscal.The Board of Directors met on Friday and declared a second interim dividend of Rs 3 per equity share (30 per cent) for the financial year ending 31 March, 2024. —*PTI*

Balmer Lawrie signs MoU with IIM Lucknow

KOLKATA, 9 FEB

Diversified PSU Balmer Lawrie has signed an MoU with IIM Lucknow for incubation of start-up, a statement issued by the company said on Friday.The PSU had launched its start-up fund in 2017 and has been instrumental in driving the initiative for the last six years and already funded quite a few.The incubation centre of IIM Lucknow has collaborated with various PSUs, banks and MNCs for developing an eco-system, the statement said, adding that the association will provide a robust structure of an accelerator programme, seed capital, smart co-working space and market access. —*PTI*

Paytm shares tank nearly 9%; fall for 2nd day

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

PHOTO: PTI

Shares of One97 Communications Ltd, which owns the Paytm brand, tanked nearly 9 per cent on Friday as investors continued to dump the stock.

Extending its previous day's decline, the stock dived 8.67 per cent to Rs 408.30 on the BSE.

Shares of the company tumbled 8.20 per cent to Rs 410 on the NSE.Shares of One97 Communications Ltd fell 10 per cent to hit lower circuit limit on Thursday, after a two-day rally in the stock fizzled out.

One97 Communications stock price had climbed 10 per cent on Wednesday and rebounded over 3 per cent on Tuesday after three days of sharp fall.

From 1-5 February (three days of trading), the company's stock tumbled over 42 per cent, wiping out Rs 20,471.25 crore from its market valuation, following the Reserve Bank of India's crackdown.

On 31 January, the RBI ordered Paytm Payments Bank Ltd, a restricted bank that can take deposits but cannot lend, to not take any further deposits or conduct credit transactions or carry out top-ups on any customers accounts, prepaid instruments, wallets, and cards for paying road tolls after 29 February.Reserve Bank Governor Shaktikanta Das on Thursday said there are no systemic worries and the action on Paytm was driven by a "lack of compliance" at Paytm.Paytm Payments Bank Ltd (PPBL) is an associate of One97 Communications Ltd. —*PTI*

Paytm E-commerce renamed as Pai Platforms

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

Paytm E-commerce has changed its name to Pai Platforms and has acquired Bitsila, a seller platform on ONDC, gaining share in the online retail business.According to sources aware of the development, the company had applied for a name change around three months ago and got the approval from the Registrar of Companies on 8 February."... The name of the company has been changed from Paytm E-Commerce Private Limited to Pai Platforms Private Limited with effect from the date of this certificate... The company was originally incorporated with the name Paytm E-Commerce Private Limited," according to a Registrar of Companies notification dated February 8.Elevation Capital is the largest shareholder in Paytm E-commerce. —*PTI*

Banks lead recovery as Sensex & Nifty surge

Nifty climbs by 64.55 points or 0.30 per cent to 21,782.50

MUMBAI, 9 FEB

Benchmark Sensex rebounded by 167 points in a volatile trade on Friday amid buying in ICICI Bank, State Bank of India and Reliance Industries.

The 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 167.06 points or 0.23 per cent to settle at 71,595.49. During the day, it hit a high of 71,676.49 and a low of 71,200.31.

The Nifty rose by 64.55 points or 0.30 per cent to 21,782.50.

Among the Sensex firms, State Bank of India, Sun Pharma, ICICI Bank, Axis Bank, Titan, Bajaj Finance, Nestle, Asian Paints, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Reliance Industries, IndusInd Bank and Wipro were the major gainers.

Mahindra & Mahindra, Bharti Airtel, NTPC, Tata Steel, Infosys, JSW Steel, Power Grid and Tata Motors were among the laggards.

"After a volatile session, the market ended on a positive note, aided by a rebound in banking stocks after yesterday's sell-off.

Mid and smallcap indices bled the most as the sentiment on the broader indices remains vigilant due to their rich valuation," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.

In Asian markets, Tokyo and Shanghai settled in the positive territory while Hong Kong ended lower.

- Among the Sensex firms, State Bank of India,ICICI Bank, Axis Bank, Nestle, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Reliance Industries, IndusInd Bank and Wipro were the major gainers

European markets were trading on a mixed note. The US markets ended in the green on Thursday.

Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 4,933.78 crore on Thursday, according to exchange data.

The BSE benchmark fell by 723.57 points or 1 per cent to settle at 71,428.43 on Thursday amid uncertainty about the timing of interest rate reduction after the Reserve Bank of India's monetary policy decision. The Nifty declined by 212.55 points or 0.97 per cent to 21,717.95.Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.04 per cent to USD 81.66 a barrel. —*PTI*

ZOMATO LTD SHARES CLIMB NEARLY 4%

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

Shares of online food delivery firm Zomato Ltd on Friday ended nearly 4 per cent higher after the company reported a consolidated net profit of Rs 138 crore in the third quarter ended December 31, 2023.

The stock advanced 5.17 per cent to hit a 52-week high of Rs 151.45 during the day on the BSE.

It ended at Rs 149.45, higher 3.78 per cent.On the NSE, shares of the company ended at Rs 149.10, up 3.46 per cent after jumping 5 per cent to Rs 151.40 -- its 52-week high level -- during the day.In traded volume terms, 114.94 lakh shares of the firm were traded at the BSE and over 25.79 crore shares at the NSE during the day.Zomato Ltd on Thursday reported a net profit of Rs 138 crore in the third quarter ended December 31, 2023, on the back of accelerated growth of quick commerce and steady performance of its core business.It had posted a consolidated net loss of Rs 347 crore in the same quarter last fiscal, Zomato Ltd said in a regulatory filing.Consolidated revenue from operations stood at Rs 3,288 crore. It was at Rs 1,948 crore in the year-ago period, it added. —*PTI*

Review equity divestment in RINL: TDP MP to govt

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

TDP Member of Parliament Kanakamedala Ravindra Kumar on Friday demanded that the Centre take steps for revival of Visakhapatnam Steel Plant and review its decision to divest government stake.

He was speaking in Rajya Sabha during Zero Hour.

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs had in January 2021 given in-principle approval for 100 per cent strategic disinvestment of the government shareholding in RINL -- also called Visakhapatnam Steel Plant or Vizag Steel -- along with RINL's stake in its subsidiaries/joint ventures.

"Subsequent to the decision of the government, there is much discontent among crores and crores of people of Andhra Pradesh. Employees and union of the plant are staging demonstrations and protesting against the decision. The request to reconsider the government decision has been made in different fora by people's representatives," Kumar said.

RINL is incurring an additional budget of Rs 15K-20K cr compared to other steel plants

PHOTO: PTI

He told the House that RINL was operating at 68 per cent of 6.3 MTPA capacity up to February 2023. Though the blast furnace and steel furnace are modernised and enhanced to 7.3 MTPA, the downstream integrated steel plant producing capacity has not been expanded to 7.3 MTPA, he added.

There are certain constraints which hinder full capacity operation of the plant.

He further stated that RINL does not own captive iron mines and has been depending on supplies from NMDC and importing coking coal from Austria. RINL is incurring an additional budget of Rs 15,000-20,000 crore compared with other steel plants.

—*PTI*

GLOBAL BUSINESS SUMMIT 2024

Union Minister of State for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship and Electronics and Information Technology Rajeev Chandrasekhar during the Global Business Summit 2024, in New Delhi, on Friday

PHOTO: PTI

WB witnesses increase in GSDP

KOLKATA, 9 FEB

West Bengal has witnessed increase in GSDP and reduction in debt and deficit indicators such as revenue deficit, fiscal deficit and debt-to-GSDP ratios, according to the Economic Review for 2023-24.

Revenue deficit as a per cent of GSDP reduced from 3.75 per cent in 2010-11 to 1.76 per cent in 2022-23, it said.

During the last few years, the West Bengal government has implemented significant public financial management reforms, resulting in improvement in the macro-fiscal parameters, according to the review which was presented on Thursday.

From 2010-11, the year when the present Trinamool Congress came to power, revenue deficit as a per cent of fiscal deficit decreased from 88.43 per cent to 54.63 per cent in 2022-23.

- Revenue deficit as a per cent of GSDP reduced from 3.75 per cent in 2010-11 to 1.76 per cent in 2022-23, it said

Debt stock of the state as a percentage of GSDP had been declining from 40.65 per cent in 2010-11 to 37.49 per cent in 2022-23.

Regarding the state's own tax revenue mobilisation, the review said it has increased from Rs 21,128 crore in 2010-11 to Rs 83,608 crore.The review also said that asset-creating capital expenditure also showed an increasing trend from Rs 2,633 crore in 2010-11 to Rs 22,753 crore in 2022-23.

The West Bengal government has also taken initiatives to provide social protection to the vulnerable segments of society.

Expenditure on social services has increased from Rs 6,845 crore in 2010-11 to Rs 77,795 crore in 2022-23, the review stated.

Expenditure on agriculture and agri-allied sector increased from Rs 3,029 crore in 2010-11 to Rs 1,7265 crore in 2022-23. —*PTI*

FOREX RESERVES JUMP TO USD 622.4 BILLION

MUMBAI, 9 FEB

India's forex reserves jumped by USD 5.736 billion to USD 622.469 billion for the week ended 2 February, the Reserve Bank said on Friday.In the previous week, the overall reserves had increased by USD 591 million to USD 616.733 billion.

In October 2021, the country's forex kitty had reached an all-time high of USD 645 billion. The reserves took a hit as the central bank deployed them to defend the rupee amid pressures caused majorly by global developments since last year.For the week ended February 2, the foreign currency assets, a major component of the reserves, increased by USD 5.186 billion to USD 55.331 billion, as per the data of RBI. —*PTI*

Petronet to invest ₹40K cr for imports

BETUL, 9 FEB

Petronet LNG Ltd, the operator of the world's largest liquefied natural gas (LNG) import terminal, will invest Rs 40,000 crore in expanding import capacity and petrochemicals with a target to treble net profit by 2028, its CEO A K Singh said.

Petronet is making a foray into the petrochemical business by investing Rs 12,685 crore in a propane dehydrogenation plant that will convert imported feedstock into propylene, as well as setting up an LNG import facility at Gopalpur in Odisha at a cost of Rs 2,300 crore, he told reporters on the sidelines of India Energy Week here.The firm, which this week extended a deal to import 7.5 million tonnes a yaer of LNG from Qatar by 20 years, is also looking at investing in overseas projects such as a floating LNG terminal at Colombo in Sri Lanka. "We have charted a 1-5-10-40 strategy -- increasing turnover to Rs 1 lakh crore in 5 years with a net profit of Rs 10,000 crore from investing Rs 40,000 crore in expansions," he said.The strategy started two years back and is for the period up to 2027-28.

Petronet currently has a turnover of Rs 55,000-60,000 crore and an annual net profit of Rs 3,200 crore.

It operates a 17.5 million tonnes-a-year flagship import terminal at Dahej in Gujarat and another 5 million tonnes facility at Kochi, Kerala.

It is also looking at setting up a 4 million tonne-a-year LNG import terminal at Gopalpur port, he said. The initial thought was to set up a floating storage & regasification based LNG import facility but the firm is now looking at a land-based terminal.—*PTI*

Avaada bags 1.4K MWp solar projects

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

Avaada Energy on Friday said it has secured over 1,400 MWp solar projects across the country from state-owned agencies.

The company has secured projects with capacities of 421 MW, 280 MW, and 700 MW in tenders issued by SECI, GUVNL, and NTPC, respectively, according to a statement.

These projects, slated for development in Gujarat and Rajasthan, underscore the company's commitment to expanding its renewable energy footprint in India, the statement said.

"Avaada Energy, a key entity in the Avaada Group's renewable energy division, is pleased to announce its successful acquisition of approximately 1,400 MWp in solar energy projects through recent tenders by central and state government agencies in India," it said.

The Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs) with these agencies will span 25 years.

These projects are slated for completion within a timeframe of 24 months.

Upon commissioning, these solar installations are expected to generate an estimated annual output of approximately 2,410 million units of renewable energy, effectively powering over 1.72 million rural households in India. —*PTI*

CHOCOLATE LOVERS HIT

Cocoa price hits record high as El Niño damages crops

NEW YORK, 9 FEB

Global cocoa prices have hit a fresh record high as dry weather hurts crops in West Africa.

Cocoa prices on the New York commodities market reached a new all-time high of USD 5,874 a ton on Thursday.

The cost of the key ingredie nt for making chocolate has now roughly doubled since the start of last year.

Soaring cocoa prices are already filtering through to consumers and squeezing major chocolate makers.

On Thursday, one of the world's biggest chocolate manufacturers Hershey warned: "Historic cocoa prices are expected to limit earnings growth this year."

The company's chief executive Michele Buck also did not rule out putting up prices for customers."We can't talk about future pricing," she said in a call with analysts but added, "given where cocoa prices are, we will be using every tool in our toolbox, including pricing, as a way to manage the business."The comments came as Hershey announced its financial results for the three months to 31 December. The figures showed sales fell by 6.6 as inflation-hit consumers cut back spending on confectionery.Last month, Mondelez, the company behind the Cadbury brand, identified rising costs of ingredients as one of the challenges it faced in the year ahead.

PHOTO: PTI

Chief financial officer Luca Zaramella said the firm had seen "significant increases in both cocoa and sugar".

- The El Niño weather phenomenon has been causing drier weather in Ghana and Ivory Coast, which are the world's two biggest produc ers of cocoa beans

In December, UK consumer group Which? said the price of some festive chocolate boxes had risen by at least 50 per cent in a year.

While overall inflation for UK supermarket food and drink eased in November to 8.3per cent, the rise in the chocolate prices was significantly higher at 15.3per cent.

Cocoa prices have been driven up by poor harvests in West Africa, which produces the bulk of global supply.The El Niño weather phenomenon has been causing drier weather in Ghana and Ivory Coast, which are the world's two biggest producers of cocoa beans.

"Traders are worried about another short production year and these feelings have been enhanced by El Niño that is threatening West Africa crops with hot and dry weather," said Jack Scoville, an analyst at Price Futures Group. —*BBC News*

PHOTO: AP

Allrounder Neser recalled to Australia test squad

MELBOURNE, 9 FEB

Bowling allrounder Michael Neser has been recalled to Australia's squad for the team's first test series in New Zealand in eight years. Neser played the last of his two tests in December 2022. "It's great to see Michael Neser get another opportunity in the squad following his ever-consistent performances over a long period and the conditions we expect," Australia chairman of selectors George Bailey said in a statement Friday.Fast bowler Scott Boland will also feature in the squad despite suffering a knee injury. Neser and Boland are unlikely to play against the Black Caps unless there are injuries to Australia's star pace trio of Pat Cummins Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood.—*AP*

PHOTO: AP

Pujara's 110 takes Saurashtra to 242-4 against Rajasthan

JAIPUR, 9 FEB

Veteran batter Cheteshwar Pujara slammed his second hundred of the ongoing Ranji Trophy season, guiding Saurashtra to a comfortable 242 for four against Rajasthan on the opening day of their Group A match, here Friday. The 36-year-old, who has 103 Tests and 262 First-Class matches under his belt, hit nine shots to the fence during his 230-ball 110. It was his 62nd hundred in first-class cricket. Pujara had scored a double hundred (243 not out), last month.Opting to bat, Saurashtra found themselves in a spot of bother after they were reduced to 74 for 3 in the 32nd over but Pujara and Sheldon Jackson (78 not out) then allied, adding 168 runs for the fourth wicket. Pujara, who last played a Test in June 2023 -- the World Test Championship final against Australia.—*PTI*

Belgium and Israel drawn in Nations League group

PARIS, 9 FEB

World Cup runner-up France European champion Italy Belgium and Israel were drawn together in a tough group Thursday for the men's UEFA Nations League that starts in September.The Nations League is the next action for UEFA member countries after this summer's European Championship where France Italy and Belgium all top-10 teams in the FIFA world rankings have qualified for the tournament in Germany and Israel is in the playoffs next month.Nations League champion Spain was drawn into a group with Denmark Switzerland and Serbia who will resume a strong rivalry that was fueled by Swiss wins in their games.—*AP*

Hockey: India women outwit USA 3-1

BHUBANESWAR, 9 FEB

Indian women produced a flawless effort to outwit the United States 3-1 and end this leg of the Hockey Pro League on a winning note here on Friday. Vandana Katariya (9th), Deepika (26th), and Samila Tete (56th) scored for the home side, while Sanne Caarls (42nd) netted the consolation goal for the USA.India started the game with an opportunity to score through a penalty corner but Deepika's drag-flick sailed wide of the post.The USA answered back with a move of their own as Elizabeth Yeager shot from a tight angle.—*PTI*

Iyer is unlikely to be picked for the last three Tests

England might become a team who do all the hard work: Vaughan

NEW DELHI, 9 FEB

Shreyas Iyer is unlikely to be picked in the India squad for the remainder of the Test series against England after complaining of stiffness in his back and groin.

Iyer has had recurring troubles with his back and had also undergone surgery last year.

The 29-year-old made 35, 13, 27, 29 in the opening two Tests and was guilty of not capitalising on starts.

"He has complained of stiffness and back issues," a BCCI source told PTI.

India is already reeling with injuries to key players K L Rahul and Ravindra Jadeja. Star batter Virat Kohli missed the first two Tests due to personal reasons and is unlikely to be available for the games in Rajkot and Ranchi as well.

The selectors are yet to announce the squad for the last three Tests but they could do that on Friday.

On Monday, India bounced back to level the five-match series with a 106-run victory in Visakhapatnam. England, who have flown back to Abu Dhabi before the third Test in Rajkot beginning 15 February, won the series opener by 28 runs.

India will be assembled in Rajkot on 11 February and England is expected to reach there the day after.

Shreyas Iyer is unlikely to be picked in the India squad *PHOTO: PTI*

Former skipper **Michael Vaughan** is worried England will become a side that doesn' t win much despite putting in the hard yards adding that the team's batting unit needs to strike a balance between playing aggressive and traditional cricket to succeed in India.

Since adopting the Bazball approach England has enjoyed a good run but the same no-holds-barred approach has also cost them several matches and series including the Ashes last year.

England has become a difficult team to criticize too much because they are so good to watch. Every game they play has us all absolutely gripped and they have improved massively under Ben Stokes Vaughan wrote in his column for The Telegraph. However, I do worry that they might become a team who do all this great work only to not win very much.

They didn t win the Ashes when they should have done and now they have let India back into a series when they still have a load of big names including Virat Kohli to come back.

Michael Vaughan *PHOTO:*

England had taken a 1-0 lead in the five-match series in India but Ben Stokes and his men let the hosts draw parity in the second Test as all their batters barring Zak Crawley were unable to get big scores.

England will not win the series if they bat the way they did in Visakhapatnam. I think the batsmen need to take a leaf out of the bowler's book. With the ball in hand, they have been quite traditional at times and aggressive at others and they have gone up and down the gears in terms of how attacking their fields have been. England had pulled off a dramatic 28-run win in the series opener on the back of vice-captain Ollie Pope's epic second-inning knock of 196 and left-arm spinner Tom Hartley's seven-wicket haul in the second innings.

The young spinners have been fantastic but for me, James Anderson's brilliant performance shows that they have to get another seamer probably Ollie Robinson in the side with him.

The batsmen meanwhile look like they only have one way to play. They are in fifth gear from ball one. I don t mind some of them playing like that because they are better at it. But Joe Root should forget it. He has 10,000 Test runs playing like Joe Root. He doesn t need to be a Bazballer. It is time for someone in the management to put an arm around Joe and say please just be yourself. I think it's as simple as the fact that he is too wrapped up in Bazball the whole ethos of excitement and entertainment.

One of England's best batters in the format Root has collected over 10,000 runs (11 468) against his name. However, the former skipper has struggled for runs in the ongoing series while adopting an aggressive approach.

Root managed scores of 5 and 16 in England's 106-run loss to India in the second Test.

While Jasprit Bumrah picked up his wicket for the eighth time Ravichandran Ashwin put an end to his frenetic innings in the second essay. —*AP*

Sumit Nagal greets Dominik Palan of Czech Republic at the end of the singles quarter-final match at the ATP Challenger Chennai. Nagal won the match 6-3,6-3. *PHOTO: PTI*

Vasek gets a wild card for the Bengaluru Open

BENGALURU, 9 FEB

Former top-30 Canadian tennis star Vasek Pospisil, whose career has been hit by a spate of injuries, was on Friday handed a wild card entry in the singles main draw of the Bengaluru Open Challenger event.

Pospisil had won the 2014 Wimbledon doubles title with American Jack Sock and also made the singles quarterfinal at the grass-court major in 2015.The 33-year-old old was ranked as high as 25 in singles in 2014 and fourth in the ATP doubles chart the following year. He also had a victory over the then-world number one, Andy Murray in 2017.Indian conditions are not alien to Pospisil, who has competed in the country thrice at the Chennai Open, the ATP 250 event that was moved to Pune before going off the calendar."I'm excited to be in India again, and I'm very grateful to the event organizers for giving me the opportunity.

I love the energy of this country and the people here so I'm hoping to have a great week," said Pospisil, who is making a comeback and is now ranked 816. Pospisil has had to contend with a few injuries in his career that pegged him back.

He had to battle a back injury in 2019 for which he had to undergo surgery, and then faced an elbow issue in 2022 but is determined to bounce back. Sunil Yajaman, Tournament Director said, "Vasek Pospisil has always been one of the finest players on the Tour. He is an inspiration and it's nice he has chosen to be in Bengaluru. —*PTI*

Australia beat West Indies in 1st T20I

HOBART, 9 FEB

David Warner slammed 70 off 36 balls in his 100th Twenty20 international and Adam Zampa grabbed three wickets as Australia beat the West Indies by 11 runs in the opening clash of their three-match series on Friday. The hosts crunched 213-7 after being sent into bat on a windy and cold Hobart evening. The visitors put up a valiant fight but they could only manage 202-8, with Zampa taking 3-26. Warner, who became only the third man after New Zealand's Ross Taylor and India's Virat Kohli to play 100 internationals in each format, hit 12 fours and a six in his explosive knock to anchor the Australia innings."Pleasing to get the win on the board. I feel refreshed and a lot of energy," said Warner.

"I said I want to play the Twenty20 World Cup and finish there and I'm excited and it's a good journey we've got going through the next six months."

David Warner *PHOTO: AP*

The West Indies hammered 16 off the opening over from Jason Behrendorff in a perfect start to the chase and put on 72 without loss in the six-over powerplay, just five shy of what Australia managed. But when Johnson Charles fell for 42 to Zampa and Brandon King for 53 to Marcus Stoinis after an 89-run stand, the wheels began coming off.Stoinis accounted for Shai Hope (16) and Glenn Maxwell removed Rovman Powell (14).Australia 213 for 7 (Warner 70, David 37*) beat West Indies 202 for 8 (King 53, Charles 42, Zampa 3-26) by 11 runs. —*AP*

Norwegian football manager and Manchester United legend Ole Gunnar Solskjaer speaks during a press conference, in Bengaluru. Solskjaer arrived in India on his maiden visit for a three-city tour. *PHOTO: PTI*

Al Hilal players celebrate the trophy of Riyadh Season Cup 2024 after their final match against Al Nassr *PHOTO: AP*

Cristiano Ronaldo*PHOTO: AP*

Al Hila fans chant 'Messi' after seeing Ronaldo

QATAR, 9 FEB

It wasn't a very pleasant Thursday night for Cristiano Ronaldo as his club Al Nassr faced a brutal defeat from Al Hilal in the final match of the Riyadh Season Cup. Failing to score a single goal, Al Nassr lost the final game by 2-0, adding fuel to Ronaldo's fury.

However, it wasn't the defeat that grabbed headlines after the match ended. Instead, it was the interaction between Ronaldo and the spectators that caught everyone's eye and attention. Ronaldo, who was already enraged as the match was heading in an unfavorable direction, started facing comments from the crowd.

A lot of spectators started chanting the name of Lionel Messi, adding to the rage of Al Nassr's skipper who had received a yellow card after he kicked the ball, resulting in a free kick being awarded against him. At this moment, the audience started teasing Ronaldo with the name of his contemporary to irk him. Ronaldo was visibly furious with the crowd's behavior and in a video that surfaced online. —*AP*

Gukesh faces a battle of wits

WANGELS, 9 FEB

Indian Grandmaster D Gukesh will battle it out against elite players from across the world, including numero uno Magnus Carlsen, in the Weissenhaus Freestyle Chess G.O.A.T Challenge here.

This will be Gukesh's first outing in an elite Freestyle Chess event that is more famously known as Fischer Random Chess or Chess 960.

Carlsen of Norway leads the eight-player field that also has Fabiano Caruana of United States, reigning World Champion Ding Liren from China, Alireza Firouzja from France, Nodirbek Abdusattorov of Uzbekistan. —*AP*

Padikkal's unbeaten 151 helps Karnataka finish 288/5 on Day 1

CHENNAI, 9 FEB

Opener Devdutt Padikkal continued his red-hot form, slamming an unbeaten 151, his third Ranji Trophy hundred this season, as Karnataka reached 288 for 5 on the opening day of their Group C match against Tamil Nadu here on Friday.

Electing to bat, the visitors lost skipper Mayank Agarwal (20) early, with just 35 runs on the board.

Agarwal was making his comeback as he missed the last game against Railways after accidentally consuming some liquid on-board a flight that caused a burning sensation in his mouth and throat. Padikkal then joined forces with opener Ravikumar Samarth (57), constructing a 132-run partnership for the second wicket, and took their side to a position of strength.

Devdutt Padikkal*PHOTO: PTI*

The stand was broken after Ajith Ram knocked over Samarth.

While Karnataka lost the third wicket at 226, Padikkal went strong, clearing the long-on boundary quite regularly to bring up his sixth First-Class ton.

Hardik Raj, unbeaten on 35, is giving company to Padikkal at stumps.For TN, spinner R Sai Kishore has bagged three wickets so far.

Brief scores:

In Chennai: Karnataka 288/5 (Devdutt Padikkal 151 batting; Sai Kishore 3/94) vs Tamil Nadu.

In Chandigarh: Chandigarh 282/6 (Manan Vohra 134; Manisankar Murasingh 2/42) vs Tripura.

In Surat: Railways 293/9 (Upendra Yadav 91; Deepraj Gaonkar 3/26) vs Goa.

In Mohali: Gujarat 250/8 (Priyank Panchal 77, Aditya Patel 58; Siddarth Kaul 3/64) vs Punjab. —*PTI*

FIFA SAYS

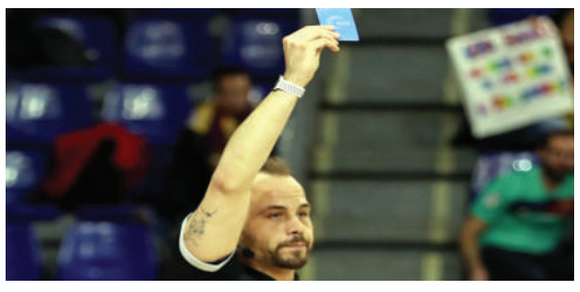
Blue cards, 'sin bins' eyed by soccer's rule-making panel

ZURICH, 9 FEB

Soccer's rule-making panel will discuss punishing certain fouls by sending players off the field for set periods like in rugby and ice hockey with referees issuing blue cards.

FIFA said Thursday that any such trials would only take place at the lower levels of the sport and that the topic would be discussed early next month at the annual meeting of the International Football Association Board.

"Sin bins" were introduced across all levels of grassroots soccer in the 2019-20 season in a bid to reduce dissent and increase fair play.



Blue card during the match between FC Barcelona and Reus Deportiu *PHOTO: AP*

British media reports Thursday said the use of the sin bins could be extended to include tactical fouls — like when a player takes down an opponent to stop a counterattack.

"Any such trials if implemented should be responsibly limited to testing at lower levels a position that FIFA intends to reiterate when this agenda item is discussed at the IFAB (annual general meeting) on 2 March," FIFA said in a statement on X formerly Twitter. —*AP*

Liverpool must steady title challenge as chasing pack close in

LONDON, 9 FEB

Liverpool must come to terms with a rare domestic loss as the Premier League leaders fight to get back on track this weekend. Beaten at Arsenal last Sunday, if Jurgen Klopp's side slip up again at home to Burnley, then either Manchester City or the Gunners could knock Liverpool out of pole position. AFP Sport looks at three key talking points ahead of the latest round of matches:

Jurgen Klopp has told his Liverpool players to "create their destiny" in the title race, starting with Saturday's visit from struggling Burnley.

After losing 3-1 against third-placed Arsenal last weekend, Klopp's men are just two points ahead of second-placed Manchester City, with Mikel Arteta's Gunners also trailing the leaders by the same margin.It was only Liverpool's second league defeat this term and Klopp said: "We didn't lose recently an awful lot of football games, we know that.

Jurgen Klopp *PHOTO: AP*

"That means dealing with defeats is a challenge, for humankind. Nobody here expects that we just will fly over Burnley or whatever."

Klopp, amid his final season in charge of Liverpool, knows his side can ill afford to crash against second-bottom Burnley and he called on them to seize the moment rather than fear it.

"It's a home game and we can turn things around, meaning the first step, and then we will see," he said.

"Nobody celebrates the champion and nobody is relegated as far as I know, so we have all the chance to create our destiny."'Humble' Arsenal ready for photo finish. —*AP*